FALL
2026



Trevor Stuurman, Mama Panther, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and THK Gallery.

African Social Research 8

Popular Culture and the Work of Imagining African Futures

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Popular Culture and the Work of Imagining African Futures

Sandra Manuel and Euclides Gonçalves

Popular culture has long provided an important vantage point for understanding social and political change in Africa. Rather than treating it as a residual category situated between supposedly "traditional" culture and elite or institutional cultural production, scholarship has recognised it as a domain of everyday creativity, social commentary and knowledge production. Karin Barber's foundational work established African popular culture as historically situated and dynamic, produced through changing relations among cultural producers, audiences, technologies and social worlds (Barber, 2018). Newell and Okome (2014) subsequently conceptualised African popular culture as an "episteme of the everyday", directing attention to how ordinary cultural practices not only represent social realities but also participate in producing knowledge about them.

Such approaches are particularly productive for thinking about African futures. The future, in this sense, is not simply a chronological moment yet to arrive. It is imagined and negotiated in the present through struggles over what kinds of lives, identities and political communities are possible. Nyamnjoh's (2017) insistence on incompleteness as a condition of social life is useful here because it unsettles conceptions of societies and identities as finished or bounded, instead emphasising becoming, encounter and openness to possibility. African futures are therefore better approached in the plural: uneven, contested and made through everyday practices, rather than constituting a singular trajectory towards "development" or "modernity".

The papers presented at the Popular Culture and African Futures workshop in Maputo — hosted by the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane and Kaleidoscopio – Public Policies and Culture — bring this question into a wide range of cultural domains: gender, music, humour, fashion, politics, food and football. Read together, however, the papers move considerably beyond these panel categories. They suggest three particularly productive intersections: popular culture as a terrain for negotiating identities and belonging; as a political language and infrastructure; and as a space in which memory, precarity and aspirations for the future coexist.

Gender is one important point of intersection. Esther Maina's analysis of teenage motherhood in Kenya examines how fashion, style and popular media participate in struggles over stigma, respectability and recognition. Teen mothers appear not merely as subjects of developmental or moral concern but as actors negotiating possibilities for belonging and future lives. Siphokazi Tau and Mbali Mazibuko approach gendered embodiment differently, using the works of the South African musicians Brenda Fassie and Busiswa Gqulu to examine rebellious Black femininities, pleasure, desire and freedom across different political generations. Lina Salomão's Mozambican case, meanwhile, demonstrates how popular music interprets HIV knowledge through gendered languages of sexuality, care, responsibility and stigma rather than simply transmitting biomedical messages.

Across these apparently different subjects lies a common question about authority over gendered bodies and futures. Who defines respectable motherhood, femininity, masculinity, sexuality, or appropriate health behaviour? Popular culture can reproduce existing moral vocabularies, but it also provides resources through which these categories are negotiated and sometimes unsettled. Importantly, this is not an uncomplicated story of resistance. The papers point instead to the simultaneous operation of constraint and possibility: the same cultural field may discipline

particular bodies while enabling others to claim visibility, pleasure, or recognition.

This ambivalence is equally important in papers that engage more explicitly with politics. Munyika Sibanda shows that Zimbabwean popular music can be mobilised by both political elites and opposition actors. Musicians operate within relations of patronage, censorship, economic insecurity and political mobilisation, rather than occupying an inherently oppositional position. Olivia Komuhangi's Ugandan case foregrounds political comedy and the capacity of laughter and satire to forge solidarities and render authority available to ridicule. Hailey Andriafanomezana's analysis of Madagascar's 2025 Gen Z protests brings memory and digital circulation together: a protest song drawing on a melody associated with the 1972 student revolution is transformed through obscenity and digital circulation into a contemporary language of dissent.

These cases resonate with Branch and Mampilly's (2015) insistence that contemporary African popular protest must be understood historically and beyond conventional institutional politics. Yet they also suggest a necessary qualification: popular culture should not be equated automatically with resistance. Songs can legitimate authority as well as challenge it; humour can puncture political power without necessarily transforming it; digital visibility can expand political publics while subjecting cultural production to new forms of technological and commercial mediation. The important analytical question therefore concerns the conditions under which cultural practices reproduce, negotiate or transform power.

A third thread concerns the relationship between material conditions and cultural possibility. Lilian Afun's study of Ghanaian fashion entrepreneurship is particularly instructive. "Made in Ghana" fashion provides livelihoods, cultural identification and spaces of autonomy, yet operates through precarious labour, informal networks and limited access to social protection and finance. The contradiction cautions against romanticising African "creativity", "resilience" and entrepreneurship while overlooking the structural insecurity within which creativity often becomes necessary.

Richard Chalo's Nairobi matatus similarly locate creativity within material urban infrastructures. Their graffiti, sound systems, humour, and performances turn vehicles into moving spaces for negotiating politics, generation, gender, and belonging. This invites a productive conversation with Simone's (2004) formulation of "people as infrastructure", which highlights the flexible relationships and collaborations through which residents of African cities create social and economic possibilities despite limited formal resources. Taher Abdel-Ghani's historical examination of Ghanaian mobile cinema offers a related spatial question: cultural institutions need not be fixed in buildings; screenings, audiences and cultural publics can themselves be mobile.

Mobility is also temporal. Across the papers, futures are repeatedly made through engagements with the past. Madagascar's contemporary protesters reactivate memories of 1972; Ghanaian fashion mobilises historical and diasporic trajectories; and Tsonga foodways examined by Matsilele Lister move between embodied cultural knowledge, urban markets, festivals and digital platforms. Mercy Kariuki similarly approaches Lamu's food practices and festivals as "living archives", transformed as gendered culinary performances circulate through digital media. Rather than opposing heritage to modernity or the analogue to the digital, these contributions show cultural continuity being accomplished precisely through adaptation and circulation.

Finally, several papers extend popular culture into questions of citizenship and collective belonging. Lezita Salvador's analysis of young cultural actors in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique is especially important because it refuses to reduce cultural practice under conditions of prolonged violence to "resilience". Instead, popular culture becomes a form of aesthetic citizenship through which young people evaluate governance, legitimacy and belonging. Nelson Lwanga's examination of the Pamoja AFCON 2027 moves to a different scale, asking

how football might enable publics to imagine an East African political community beyond national borders, while Timothy Anyanwu connects football culture in north-western Nigeria to environmental vulnerability and possibilities for collective climate action. Popular culture consequently emerges not as a separate cultural sphere but as one of the terrains upon which citizenship, region, environment and political community are imagined.

Taken together, these papers make three points especially visible. First, popular culture is not inherently emancipatory: it is a contradictory terrain in which power is reproduced as well as challenged. Second, African futures are simultaneously material and imaginative. Cultural creativity can expand what is imaginable without removing the structural conditions—precarious employment, gender inequality, political repression, violence or environmental crisis—that delimit what is possible. Third, the future does not displace the past. Memory, heritage and earlier political repertoires are continually reworked to produce contemporary possibilities.

The collection therefore encourages us to move beyond asking what popular culture tells us *about* African futures. Popular culture is itself one of the places in which futures are being made and contested. The more productive questions are consequently: whose futures become imaginable, through which cultural practices, under what material and political conditions, and with what capacity to turn imagined possibilities into lived realities? Approached in this way, African futures remain necessarily plural and unfinished—a field of possibility, but also of unequal power.

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Embodiment, Space, and Identity: Reading Brenda Fassie and Busiswa Gqulu — Navigating Disembodiment through Music, Art, and Worlding African Futures

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Introduction

South Africa's postcolonial identity is shaped by projects of justice and reconciliation after colonialism and apartheid. Across this history, artists, activists, and churches have used creative media to confront social ills. Today, music continues to stage political and social dialogue from a womxn's perspective. We read the works of South African artists Brenda Fassie (1964–2004) and Busiswa Gqulu (1988–) through the lens of rebellious Black femininities and Black feminist geographies. We focus on how Brenda Fassie and Busiswa Gqulu enact rebellious Black femininity as political strategy and as a collaborative space for world-making. By attending to temporal context—Brenda's iconography across late apartheid and early democracy and Busiswa's discography in contemporary South Africa—we show how rebellious femininities converge across time through coded practices in sound, dress, and performance (hooks 1990; Gqola 2013; Ligaga 2016; Musila 2022).[1]

We read these artists within a lineage of Black womxn's making under shifting socio-political dynamics, showing how aesthetic and media representations of freedom, desire, and agency render certain femininities 'rebellious' (Mazibuko 2022). Apartheid spatial orders—townships and homelands—curated Black life and gender relations (White 1993; Baldwin 1975; Khunou 2009), shaping Brenda's early life and career (Mazibuko 2023). Although they emerge from different yet overlapping political contexts, both mobilize embodiment, adornment, and performance to contest racialized, gendered scripts and to imagine African futures. Drawing on selected songs and music videos, we argue that Brenda and Busiswa perform 'cartographies of struggle' that map the spaces they inhabit and re-make. Their practices model erotic power, pleasure, desire, and freedom (Lorde 1978) and thereby animate collaborative, popular-cultural sites for co-constructing African possibilities, especially for African women and queers (Mohanty 1991; Noxolo 2018; Mazibuko 2023).

Rebellious Femininities and Black Feminist Geographies

Gender entails performances that affirm, modify, or refuse normative femininities/masculinities (Butler 1990; Mazibuko 2022). For Mazibuko (2023), rebellious femininities are plural and simultaneous: Black women co-construct life-worlds organized around desire, pleasure, freedom, and power. Following Noxolo (2024) and McKittrick (2006), black feminist geographies understand Black women's spatial practices as 'infused with sensations and distinct ways of knowing,' redirecting analysis from dispossession to creative spatial production (Brown 2017; McKittrick 2006). Colonialism spatialized the Black female body as property and public, reproductive technology; apartheid and its afterlives reproduce economic and sexual violence (McKittrick 2006). Against this, Brenda and Busiswa oscillate among multiple femininities to expand imagination and praxis, using resistance to productively refuse 'respectable' scripts (Hungwe 2006; Mazibuko 2023).

Following Bakare-Yusuf (2008), we treat embodiment as capacity: the body acts in the world prior to reflection (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Centering embodied capacities reframes

power beyond simple binaries and clarifies how African women forge identities and gendered experience (Arnfred 2011, 2015; Mazibuko 2023). These artists' mobility across geographies (Tate 2005/2017) and their insertions of Black femininity exemplify world-making that transforms exclusionary spaces into grounds for possibility (Puwar 2004).

Embodied Practice as Freedom

Brenda—South Africa's first openly queer pop icon to achieve mass fame—became emblematic of audacious living against racialized and gendered scripts. Raised in KwaLanga township, she moved to Johannesburg to stand in for Anneline Malebo of the all-girl soul group Joy and released the hit 'Weekend Special' (1983) with the Big Dudes (Madondo 2014; Tau 2021).[2]

We read 'Good Black Woman' from *Too Late for Mama* (1989) as a practice of embodied freedom. The lyric narrates a confrontation with police amid her brother Themba's political imprisonment tied to the 1976 student uprisings (Mazibuko 2023). Brenda claims goodness—'I am a good black woman'—while talking back to white police, she sings: She sings:

> *Early on Monday morning*
> *Police arrest my brother*
> *For working for a black community*
> *Monday afternoon went to see my brother*
> *Policeman treated me like a donkey*
> *I say to policeman you've got a bad attitude*
> *Oh no am no criminal*
> *l am a good black women*

The song refuses the binary between 'respectable' femininity and rebellion: it shape-shifts, asserting tradition even as it contests racial-patriarchal authority (Ligaga 2014; Tamale 2011). Lorde (1981) reminds us that self-definition is survival: either we name ourselves or be named to our disadvantage. Brenda's audacity reframes 'goodness' as resistance to white violence and as entitlement to freedom.

The idea of being a 'good' black woman is very contentious, and what this means is still a question in a post-apartheid South Africa, where womxn's bodies can get policed by patriarchal standards, despite human rights being fundamental in this society. Brenda's audacity to call-out a violent and racist police force while posturing and asserting herself as a 'Good Black Woman' is indicative of how rebellion is not simply reactionary to power or in binary opposition to traditional femininity (Mazibuko 2023). Simultaneously, her cheeky talk-back at a police officer complicates her as legibly respectable as she reminds us of her fearlessness and assertive call for justice. Thus for Brenda, being a good black woman is about being in resistance to white oppression and violence while acknowledging her right to self-determination and actualisation as a Good Black woman, even while her femininity shows up audaciously in the face of apartheid policemen. Rebellion then, as Brenda demonstrates, is the capacity to shape-shift between different articulations of femininity and to occupy various femininities simultaneously as a means of active resistance but also an entitlement to freedom (Mazibuko 2023). As she references her brother who serves the community - she interestingly reminds the white police officer of her brother's value to the black community in resistance to the violence on black bodies by white bodies - that freedom is good.

Ligaga (2014) argues that the representation of gender and sexuality in Africa and of African women is fixed within the gaze of colonial and traditional patriarchal traditions as a way to police the expression of African women's gender and sexuality. Therefore the surveillance we see in Brenda's good black woman is about ensuring there is a specific behavior of African women (Tamale, 2011). Ligaga further reminds us about how the media plays a pivotal role in "ensuring this kind of discursive control" (2014: 252). And that women who carry this burden of being under surveillance tend to have a sense of freedom in their art despite social norms (Obbo, 1980 cited in Ligaga (2014)).

Brenda's choice of words in confronting the white policeman is very interesting, she says, the policeman treated her like a donkey, often associated with being senseless; and she then says to him she is not a criminal but in fact a good black woman. A very interesting act of defining oneself,

of which Audre Lorde reminds us of when in her 1981 interview where she says, "as a black woman I have to deal with identity or I don't exist at all. I can't depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will. If the world defines you, it will define you to your disadvantage. So either I'm going to be defined by myself or not at all" (Lorde, 1981:18). This definition of black and African women continues to perpetuate in the stereotypes we see years post apartheid, or colonialism or slavery.

Political Strategy as Pleasure

Mthatha born spoken word artist and poet Busiswa's early breakout on DJ Zinhle's *My Name Is* (2012) reworks the imperative 'say my name' into self-naming and mutual citation: 'Her Majesty… the Queen.' The track asserts agency and celebrates women's strength, resonating with the slogan 'wathinta abafazi, wathinta imbokodo' ('you strike a woman, you strike a rock') while refusing masculinist frames of power (DJ Zinhle 2012).[3] In the song, Busiswa gets on the mic:

> *Her majesty (Her majesty)*
> *The queen (The queen)*
> *Royal highness, hard, rock*
> *Her majesty the queen is in the booth come to the dance floors*
> *My name is (Zintle's voice)*
> *My name is (Zintle's voice)*
> *Khawuleza, khawuleza [hurry, hurry]*
> *Iyaphel' ingoma khawuleza [the song is coming to an end, hurry]*
> *Yes the night is young but it won't last forever*
> *If you know you're a diva*
> *Yizo representa yeah [come and represent]*
> *My name is*
> *S'gub' us'vule [interpretation: play the beat]*
> *Kalawa[4] phakathi [Kalawa is inside]*
> *Nyus' ivolume [raise the volume]*
> *Mamel uZinhle [listen to Zintle]*
> *Ak'dlalele (Ay ay) [whilst she plays her beat/music for you]*

In this song, agency is used explicitly, and more so, the owning of one's identity as a womxn and a feminine force. The video stages a 'gentlemen's club' into a site of feminine pleasure and community; by the close, women occupy the space exclusively, reversing the gaze and its politics of belonging (Tau 2021; Motsemme 2003; Rajah 2022). Popular culture thus represents and evolves femininities that advocate joy and the erotic even within tensions with heteropatriarchy and capitalism (Mazibuko 2022). These tensions also exist within the broader entertainment industry, particularly in dance music, where female and womxn artists navigate between the male gaze and one's feminine strength.

We argue that spaces like gentlemen clubs in Johannesburg "are spaces that marked the politics of belonging and othering" in gender, class and race in some cases. And noting that Johannesburg is the economic hub of South Africa, and Sandton in Johannesburg is the richest square mile in Africa, one can imagine that this is a space that only a select few could access. Busiswa's use of space here is "important in the way in which it not only informs her artistry" (Tau, 2021:33) but it also shows how "women can express and enjoy their sexuality purely because it is their prerogative to do so" (Rajah, 2022: 58).

In "Nasi iStocko! Forging contemporary feminist imaginaries of liberation" (2022) Mbali Mazibuko makes the point that "popular culture plays a crucial role in the representation, evolution and development of femininities that advocate for the joy and pleasure of women as well as the erotic" (2022: 41) and although these femininities exists in a tension with heteropatriarchy and capitalism, this tension can provide a space for locating agency too.

Agency and the Co-Construction of African Futures

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change (Lorde 1978) Similar to Lorde's (1978) call for women to claim their

erotic by actualising their full creative life force, Mazibuko (2023) makes the connection between Lorde and Tamale regarding the full creative life-force for African women. Tamale (2011) reminds us that sexuality is not limited to sex-acts but rather to '(re)claim sexualities as not only multiple and diverse, but as also encompassing gender, self-esteem, dress, sensuality, physical sensations, communication, creativity and ethics (Tamale, 2011:12, quoted in Mazibuko 2023).

For women, this has meant a celebration of the erotic or sexualities considered as a source of power and information within our lives through which rebellious femininities are made possible. The embrace of our erotic and sexualities as African women translates in articulations of our imaginations of freedom, desire and agency.

We close with Lorde's insistence that the erotic is a creative life-force, and with Tamale's argument that African sexualities encompass dress, sensuality, communication, and ethics—resources through which rebellious femininities articulate freedom, desire, and agency (Lorde 1978; Tamale 2011).

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Endnotes

1 On mononymous usage: both artists are widely known by first name; this naming acknowledges symbolic and affective ties with audiences and is used throughout.
2 Brenda's queer visibility and career trajectory are summarized here to contextualize the reading; see Madondo (2014) and Tau (2021).
3 Label history: the track features DJ Zinhle's production and, at the time, label affiliations; Busiswa later became independent.
4 The record label Busiswa and DJ Zintle were signed to. Busiswa has since left the label and is an independent artist.

Fashioning Futures: Popular Culture, Policy, and the Politics of Teen Motherhood in Africa

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Teen motherhood in Africa is a persistent focus of public debate, routinely framed as a crisis of morality, development, or gender inequality. This paper argues that popular culture provides a critical lens for understanding how teenage mothers in Kenya navigate stigma, belonging, and aspiration. Through discourse analysis of fashion practices, such as the symbolism of school uniforms and the hybridity of streetwear, alongside media representations and digital memes, the study reveals how everyday aesthetics intersect with the politics of respectability and recognition. Popular culture emerges not as a mere reflection of social anxiety, but as a contested space where teen mothers exercise agency, confront structural exclusion, and fashion alternative futures. By centering the lived experiences and cultural representations of teenage mothers, the paper positions them as active shapers of African futures. It highlights the ethical stakes in how societies frame girlhood and motherhood, and demonstrates how creative cultural expression opens possibilities for reimagining dignity and hope. Ultimately, the study contends that any meaningful engagement with African futurity must account for the cultural politics of gender and the ways marginalized young women articulate identity and belonging through popular forms.

Crisis, Culture, and the Politics of Futurity

Teenage motherhood in Africa is rarely a private event; it is a hyper-visible social text upon which anxieties about morality, gender, and national development are forcefully inscribed. In policy and public health discourse, the teen mother is predominantly portrayed as a social problem, a marker of developmental failure, a burden, and a figure of vulnerability (Bhana, 2016; Moletsane, 2018). This crisis narrative, while grounded in real concerns, positions teenage mothers as passive subjects of intervention, obscuring their agency and the structural inequalities shaping their lives (Duby et al., 2025). In Kenya, this framing coexists with major public health interventions, notably the provision of free contraceptives, which are framed technocratically as a rational solution to early pregnancy.

Yet the availability of contraception does not resolve deeper cultural contradictions. Access is entangled with moral surveillance and stigma, rendering sexually active girls simultaneously targets of modern policy and objects of moral condemnation. Teenage mothers thus embody a public paradox: evidence of policy "failure" and targets of intensified regulation. This policy context is crucial. Popular culture engages not just with motherhood, but with the judgments and anxieties produced by reproductive health regimes. Memes, fashion, and media become implicit commentaries on an environment that promises prevention while stigmatizing sexuality, serving as informal spaces for negotiation, much like other digital tools in young people's lives (NEA et al., 2009).

These dynamics reflect what scholars term unequal regimes of futurity (Appadurai, 2013; Honwana, 2012), in which some are granted a future of aspiration, while others are cast as having failed to attain it. Teenage mothers are often positioned outside the linear trajectory of education and productive adulthood, central to development imaginaries, their lives rendered cautionary tales rather than sites of possibility (DeJaeghere, 2018). To understand their futures differently, analysis must shift to the cultural arenas where futurity is daily imagined and contested. Following scholarship that sees futures as socially produced, affectively charged, and culturally mediated (Appadurai, 2013; Bryant & Knight, 2019), this paper examines popular culture as a key site for the "capacity to aspire" under constraint.

In Kenya, popular culture, fashion, memes, television, and radio are vibrant spaces where the meanings of girlhood, motherhood, and success are negotiated (Nyairo & Ogude, 2005). These forms do not merely reflect reality; they shape which lives are seen as valuable and which futures appear attainable. This study examines how Kenyan popular culture mediates between teenage motherhood and futurity. It analyzes: 1) how teenage mothers use fashion and styling as embodied practices to negotiate resilience and aspiration, and 2) how media representations reproduce and disrupt narratives of failure. Through artefacts like school uniforms, *kitenge*, memes, and TV storylines, it reveals popular culture as a battleground where gendered futures are contested. By centering the cultural expressions of teenage mothers, the paper argues that African futurity is not solely crafted by states and elites, but is also fashioned from the margins, through the affective and creative labors of young women asserting their belonging and reimagining their place in Africa's future.

Theoretical Framework: Popular Culture as a Site of Gendered Political Struggle

This analysis is grounded in feminist cultural studies, African feminist scholarship, and debates on the everyday politics of recognition. It draws on feminist standpoint theory (Smith, 1987; Collins, 2000), which centers the lived experiences and self-definitions of marginalized groups. An African feminist perspective (Tamale, 2020; Bakare-Yusuf, 2003) further grounds the analysis in the specific cultural, economic, and colonial histories that shape gender norms and bodily practices on the continent.

A core theoretical pillar is Stuart Hall's (1981) concept of popular culture as a contested terrain. Here, popular culture is neither pure resistance nor simple domination, but a field where dominant ideologies about gender, respectability, and success are circulated, naturalized, and potentially challenged. Within this terrain, the fashioning of the body becomes a critical political practice. Following Mbembe's (2001) work on the "aesthetics of vulgarity," stylistic choices in postcolonial contexts can be acts of self-authoring against official narratives that seek to fix identity.

The framework also engages with the concept of "affective futures" (Bryant & Knight, 2019), how feelings of hope, anxiety, and aspiration are woven into everyday life and cultural production. For teenage mothers, whose futures are often publicly declared foreclosed, practices of styling and media engagement constitute affective labor. Dressing well, sharing a meme, or identifying with a media character become ways of managing stigma and cultivating an orientation toward a future of dignity. Finally, the lens of "recognition politics" (Fraser, 2000; Honneth, 1996) is employed. The struggle of teenage mothers is not only for redistributive justice but also for cultural and intersubjective recognition, to be seen as full citizens, good mothers, and modern agents of their own lives. Popular culture is a primary arena where this struggle for a legible and respectable identity is waged. Together, these theoretical strands frame popular culture not just as mere expression, but also as a gendered arena of future-making where affect, aesthetics, and identity converge in political struggle.

Methodology: Reading the Cultural Text

This study employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine how meanings of teenage motherhood, gender, and futurity are produced and contested in everyday Kenyan life. The interpretive, multi-sited methodology analyzes both embodied practices and mediated representations across digital and physical spaces. It focuses on cultural material circulating between 2020 and 2024, a period witnessing intensified public debate on adolescent pregnancy, school re-entry policies, and youth futures.

Data is drawn from four interrelated sources:

1. **Digital Ethnography:** Analysis of publicly available social media content on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, where young Kenyan women share personal narratives, style, and engage with memes related to motherhood and

girlhood. The focus is on discursive patterns, rather than individual biographies, adhering to ethical guidelines for public online research.

2. **Media Analysis:** Close readings of representations in popular Kenyan television dramas, films, and vernacular radio programming. This includes recurring storylines, call-in discussions, and blogs that address pregnancy, morality, stigma, and resilience, treating them as sites where dominant and alternative narratives are circulated.

3. **Visual and Material Culture Analysis:** Examination of public-facing artefacts like health and educational posters, alongside everyday fashion and styling observed in markets, transport hubs, churches, and events. Attention is given to symbolic items: school uniforms, *kitenge*, hairstyles, streetwear, and how they negotiate respectability, modernity, and maternal identity.

4. **Secondary Literature:** Engagement with ethnographic, sociological, and feminist studies on teen motherhood, youth culture, and gender in Kenya and Eastern Africa to ground cultural interpretations within documented social and structural contexts.

Across all sources, the analysis prioritizes widely circulated cultural texts over isolated examples to interpret dominant and emergent discourses. Selection was based on visibility, frequency, and resonance in public discourse, particularly where themes or symbols recurred across platforms. This approach, informed by familiarity with local cultural codes and media landscapes, enables a contextualized reading attentive to embedded power relations.

Analysis: Fashioning the Self, Reading the Image

The Uniform and Its Afterlife: Symbolism, Loss, and Reclamation

The school uniform holds a dominant symbolic position in Kenya's discourse on teenage motherhood. Across policy, media, and public health campaigns, it operates as a visual shorthand for sanctioned girlhood, representing innocence, discipline, and futurity. Pregnancy necessitates its premature removal, a moment that often formalizes exclusion from education and socially recognized futures (Population Council, 2019; Mukabana et al., 2024). In this narrative, the absent uniform becomes a public sign of failure, marking a transition from "student" to "problem."

This symbolism is actively mobilized. Public service posters, such as those by the Ministry of Health with the tagline "Education First, Pregnancy Can Wait", frequently depict a faded or abandoned uniform in the background of a distressed young mother. Similarly, storylines in television dramas like *Selina* visually reinforce the uniform's loss as a moral and temporal rupture, framing education as the sole legitimate pathway and deviation as irreversible loss.

Yet popular culture also circulates counter-narratives that challenge this foreclosure. Media hashtags like #ReEntryKE, #KeepGirlsInSchool, #EducationForAll, and #BackToSchoolMum aggregate stories of teenage mothers returning to class. Human-interest features in outlets like the *Nation's* "My Life, My Story" segment often spotlight individuals who have reclaimed the uniform, literally or symbolically, by retaining a school sweater or bag as a marker of ongoing aspiration. These representations, though not universal, function as cultural interventions. They posit an "afterlife" for the uniform, one of reclamation rather than erasure, and assert, both discursively and materially, that motherhood and educated futurity need not be mutually exclusive (Kennedy, 2023).

Streetwear, *Kitenge*, and the Aesthetics of Resilient Motherhood

Beyond the institutional space of school, teenage mothers navigate a sartorial landscape shaped by competing, often contradictory expectations. Dominant norms of maternal respectability in many Kenyan contexts continue to privilege modesty, restraint, and age-appropriate femininity,

frequently associated with conservative dress and *kitenge* fabrics. At the same time, youthful urban culture valorizes globalized streetwear aesthetics; tracksuits, sneakers, branded t-shirts, and contemporary hairstyles, that signal modernity, peer belonging, and cultural relevance.

Analysis of social media content and everyday public spaces reveals that teenage mothers rarely adhere exclusively to either aesthetic regime. Instead, a recurring and widely observable practice is sartorial hybridity: the creative combination of streetwear with kitenge, traditional hairstyles with contemporary fashion, or youthful silhouettes with markers of maternal responsibility (Allman, 2004; Hopkins, 2006). On platforms like Instagram and TikTok, popular young mothers such as @its_wambui__ or @shantel.ke frequently post content that embodies this fusion; for example, pairing a Nike Air Max sneaker with a '*kitenge*' wrap skirt, or styling a *crop top* under a tailored *kitenge* blazer. In public spaces like Kamukunji or Gikomba markets, and at community churches, one observes similar combinations: a braided weave hairstyle accessorized with traditional beaded earrings, or a baby carrier made of *kitenge* worn over ripped jeans and a football jersey.

These combinations are not merely stylistic choices but discursive practices through which young mothers negotiate stigma and recognition. By blending visual codes, they refuse the binary positioning of "*irresponsible girl*" versus "*respectable mother*." This aesthetic labor, often undertaken under economic constraint, constitutes a form of everyday resilience. The careful curation of appearance serves as a strategy to deflect pity, moral judgment, and social exclusion, allowing teenage mothers to claim public visibility on their own terms (Vinson, 2017).

While these practices are illustrative rather than universal, their recurrence across multiple settings suggests a broader cultural pattern in which fashion becomes a means of asserting dignity, value, and continued social belonging. The styled body thus emerges as a site of refusal, challenging narratives that cast early motherhood as bodily and social ruin (Kaundal & Itoo, 2024).

Media Representations: Between Stereotype and Sympathy

Popular Kenyan media, particularly television dramas and vernacular radio programming, are powerful sites through which teenage motherhood is publicly imagined, debated, and understood. Analysis of recurring storylines between 2020 and 2024 reveals a persistent reliance on familiar moralizing tropes (Willems, 2017; Ayisi, 2013). The long-running television series *Selina* (Maisha Magic, Showmax), for instance, features the character Vera, whose pregnancy is initially framed through the trope of the "*ruined girl*": a promising student whose future is abruptly jeopardized, precipitating family conflict and social shame. Similarly, the telenovela *Pete* (Citizen TV) deploys the "*scheming girl*" narrative, in which pregnancy is portrayed as a calculated strategy for financial survival or securing a partner. Such representations function as public cautionary tales, reinforcing moral discipline and legitimizing stigma around teenage motherhood.

However, the media landscape is not monolithic. Alongside these dominant frames of moral failure, more ambivalent and sympathetic portrayals have emerged. Over time, *Selina* allows Vera's character to move beyond her initial downfall, depicting her negotiation of stigma alongside emotional depth and entrepreneurial initiative as a young mother. Parallel imaginaries are also evident in vernacular radio call-in and audio programs, including *Wĩrute Gũkũ* on Kameme FM and *Piga Makofi* on Radio Maisha, which aired intermittently through project-based collaborations between radio stations and development partners. These time-bound broadcasts and audio features, produced through initiatives supported by UNESCO/AKCMO, Radio Baraza, and FAWE Kenya's *Tamatisha* Initiative, focused on education re-entry, parenting, and adolescent wellbeing. In episodes addressing school re-entry policies and parenting struggles, teenage mothers and young women narrated their lived experiences in their own voices, complicating linear narratives of failure and generating public empathy and recognition (Ligaga 2020). Although episodic, these emotionally charged platforms opened fleeting but consequential spaces of future-

making, where resilience, care, and reproductive possibility were articulated against otherwise foreclosed temporal horizons (Kennedy 2023).

These sympathetic portrayals do not dismantle the structural inequalities that constrain young mothers, nor do they fully displace underlying moral framings. Nevertheless, their increasing visibility signals a cultural shift in which teenage mothers are represented as complex subjects with interiority, agency, and future-oriented aspirations. Media thus emerges as a contested terrain where stereotypes are not only reproduced but also unsettled through narrative complexity and participatory discourse (Ahmed 2024).

Memes, Digital Solidarities, and Access to Reproductive Health

The digital sphere, specifically through memes, WhatsApp forwards, and short-form content, constitutes a crucial arena for the informal cultural politics of teenage motherhood in Kenya (Shifman, 2014). These widely circulated texts employ humor and irony to articulate layered social frustrations. For instance, the *'Pregnant Girl Starter Pack'* meme satirizes homogenizing stereotypes of irresponsibility, while the *'Juggling Mama'* format viscerally captures the material contradictions between childcare, education, and social life. Collectively, they give shared form to the daily pressures of moral surveillance, economic precarity, and the emotional labour of early motherhood.

Beyond social commentary, these memes establish a direct, critical interface with reproductive health policy. By adapting global digital templates to local contexts, they facilitate nuanced public engagement with state-provided services. The internationally recognizable *'Distracted Boyfriend'* format, for example, is repurposed to satirize contraceptive choice- 'Kyle' gazes longingly at a "3-year implant" while turning away from a "daily pill." Similarly, *'Navigating the Clinic'* memes use screenshots from popular local television dramas to humorously depict encounters at *'Uzazi Uzima'* service points, Kenya's free maternity care initiative. One widespread example contrasts a young woman's wary expression with the text: *"My body saying it's ready for another baby"* versus *"The Clinical Officer handing me a 5-year implant brochure."*

Through this shared vernacular of satire, memes function as a form of affective resistance (Paasonen, 2021). Humor actively reframes stigma, transforming potential shame and isolation into collective recognition and community. This process allows teenage mothers to narrate their experiences on their own terms, creating fleeting but meaningful digital solidarities that counter the moralizing gaze of mainstream discourse (Bosch, 2017). Consequently, these digital texts are more than entertainment; they function as micro-sites of future-making, where social critique, peer solidarity, and the negotiation of reproductive autonomy dynamically converge (Appadurai, 2013; Nyabola, 2018).

Re-imagining African Futures from the Margins

This analysis reveals a central contradiction in Kenyan discourses on teenage motherhood: teen mothers are hyper-visible as social problems yet invisible as complex, future-oriented subjects. Popular culture is the primary terrain where this tension is negotiated. Through fashion, media, and digital humor, teenage mothers face intense moral scrutiny while simultaneously accessing cultural resources to assert dignity, recognition, and belonging. At stake is futurity itself. Dominant policy and media discourses position teenage mothers as temporally "out of sync," having prematurely exited the normative future of education and respectable adulthood. This reproduces an unequal distribution of the ***"capacity to aspire"*** (Appadurai, 2013), framing their lives as cautionary failures rather than stories of possibility.

However, the cultural practices examined in this paper reveal a different temporal logic at work. The everyday labor of self-fashioning, whether through the reclamation of the school uniform, the hybrid aesthetics of kitenge and streetwear, or the circulation of humorous memes, constitutes a future-oriented practice. These acts are not nostalgic returns to a lost past, nor are they naive assertions of optimism. Rather, they are pragmatic,

affective, and creative engagements with possibility under constraint. As the analysis has demonstrated, interpreting these cultural texts, from uniforms to memes, through the lens of secondary ethnographic and feminist scholarship reveals how deeply personal aesthetic and narrative acts are responses to documented structures of exclusion and stigma. Through popular culture, teenage mothers assert that their lives remain open to becoming, even when dominant narratives insist otherwise.

Critically, these practices complicate linear, developmentalist visions of African futures. Teenage mothers articulate futures that are fragmented, plural, and negotiated in the present. Popular culture thus becomes a site of everyday future-making, where marginalized young women manage uncertainty and cultivate hope through aesthetic and narrative strategies (Bryant & Knight, 2019). The future is not deferred; it is actively crafted in the present.

This has vital implications for policy. Interventions like re-entry programs often focus on material access while overlooking the symbolic and cultural dimensions of exclusion. As the uniform analysis shows, stigma is embedded in cultural signs that dictate who belongs to the future. Policies that ignore this cultural politics risk reinforcing the very exclusion they aim to remedy. Engaging with popular culture is therefore essential to understand how policies are received, resisted, or reworked in everyday life (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2021). Effective support must address not only structural barriers, but also the contested cultural narratives that shape teenage mothers' sense of possibility and belonging.

To move beyond reductive crisis narratives, analyses of teenage motherhood in Africa must take popular culture seriously as a site of political and temporal struggle. This study of Kenyan fashion, media, and digital forms shows that teenage mothers are not merely objects of stigma or policy intervention, but active cultural agents engaged in self-definition and future-making.

Cultural texts, from school uniforms and hybrid sartorial styles to sympathetic media portrayals and defiant memes, are not superficial. They are key resources through which teenage mothers negotiate recognition, manage stigma, and articulate alternative forms of belonging. The politics of teenage motherhood thus unfolds not only within institutions, but across bodies, screens, and digital platforms, positioning popular culture as a critical arena where gendered futures are imagined and contested.

By foregrounding this cultural politics, the paper reframes debates on African futures that are often constrained by developmental metrics or elite visions that marginalize young women. Futures are also fashioned from below, through the everyday creativity, resilience, and persistence of teenage mothers across African cities and contexts. Recognizing teenage mothers as participants in Africa's future, rather than symbols of its failure, calls for renewed scholarly and policy attentiveness to the cultural labor through which young women assert dignity and aspiration under constraint. Africa's future, then, is not only debated in policy spaces, but continually made in everyday life, through acts of style, storytelling, and reclaimed possibility.

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Performing Futures: Gendered Voice and Health Communication in Mozambican Popular Music

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Introduction

Mozambique remains among the countries most affected by HIV in Southern Africa, where HIV continues to be shaped by gendered and social inequalities. In Mozambique, women experience particular vulnerability, while gender norms also influence men's engagement with HIV testing and care (Ha et al., 2019; UNAIDS, 2024). Stigma further affects disclosure, testing, treatment, and social relationships, demonstrating that HIV cannot be understood only as a biomedical issue (Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

Since the early 2000s, Mozambique's HIV response has expanded through national programmes and international partnerships supporting prevention, treatment, and community outreach. Youth-oriented initiatives such as *Programa Geração Biz* combined sexual and reproductive health education with peer-led communication and adolescent-focused interventions (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015). These approaches demonstrate the importance of communication that is socially and culturally intelligible.

Popular music provides one such communicative space. Circulating across urban, peri-urban, and rural settings and performed in languages including Portuguese and Xitsonga, music can embed health messages within familiar narratives, metaphors, emotions, and moral vocabularies. This study therefore examines Mozambican popular music as more than a vehicle for transmitting HIV information. It asks how musical performances construct gendered voices, negotiate moral authority, and connect present behavior to imagined social and intergenerational futures.

HIV Communication in Africa

HIV communication in Africa has increasingly moved beyond information-based awareness campaigns toward approaches that recognize social relations, stigma, gender inequality, and cultural context (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004; Parker & Aggleton, 2003). Although treatment coverage has improved substantially, persistent social and structural inequalities continue to shape the HIV response (Orlando et al., 2025; Piot et al., 2015).

Mozambique illustrates these challenges. Research on *Programa Geração Biz* demonstrates the importance of peer education and youth-centred communication in adolescent sexual and reproductive health programming (Chandra-Mouli et al., 2015). At the same time, research on the programme highlights the importance of sociocultural and linguistic relevance in communication strategies (Rodrigues da Silva, 2020).

These studies establish the importance of culturally grounded HIV communication but leave space for a closer examination of popular music as a cultural and performative form. Rather than asking only whether music transmits correct health information, this study examines how music gives HIV meaning: how illness, responsibility, sexuality, care, and prevention are narrated and performed.

Music and Performance in Health Interventions

Music has long been used in African HIV communication, drawing on emotional resonance, oral traditions, participation, and culturally familiar

forms of expression (Barz & Cohen, 2011; Bekalu & Eggermont, 2015). Music can communicate information while simultaneously creating emotional and social spaces in which illness and responsibility become publicly discussable.

Ethnomusicological research has shown that HIV-related music can operate within wider systems of community expression and social meaning (Barz & Cohen, 2011). Nthala (2013), for example, demonstrates the potential of musical arts for participatory HIV intervention. Such work is important because it moves beyond the assumption that music is simply an attractive way of delivering a predetermined message.

In Mozambique, culturally and linguistically grounded communication has likewise been identified as important to adolescent sexual and reproductive health programmes (Rodrigues da Silva, 2020). Yet less attention has been given to the performative dimensions of Mozambican popular music: how artists construct voices, mobilize metaphors, stage tensions, and negotiate authority through performance. This study addresses that gap by treating music as a cultural arena where health messages are interpreted, negotiated, and given moral and social meaning.

Gender, Voice, and Moral Authority

Gender is central to HIV communication because prevention, sexuality, disclosure, care, and treatment are embedded in unequal social relations. In Mozambique, gendered stigma affects HIV testing and engagement with services (Ha et al., 2019), while broader scholarship demonstrates how stigma attaches illness to moral judgements and social identities (Parker & Aggleton, 2003).

Popular music provides a particularly useful space for examining these processes because gender is not simply described in lyrics; it is also performed through voice, address, narrative position, humour, metaphor, and representations of sexuality and responsibility. Yet relatively little attention has been paid to how Mozambican artists use these performative resources to negotiate HIV-related moral authority.

This study therefore connects gender and performance by examining how musical voices reproduce, negotiate, and sometimes challenge assumptions about masculinity, femininity, sexuality, care, and responsibility. It also considers intergenerational continuities and shifts in these representations. The concept of *Performing Futures* captures the way musical narratives connect present choices with anticipated individual, familial, and collective consequences.

Theoretical Framework: Performing Futures

The study draws on performance theory, feminist theory, and narrative theory. Performance theory understands performance as a space in which social norms can be enacted, negotiated, and transformed (Schechner, 2003; Turner, 1982). Feminist theories of gender performativity further draw attention to the repeated acts and discourses through which gendered identities and expectations are produced (Butler, 1990, 1993). Narrative theory contributes a temporal dimension by showing how narratives connect present actions with memory, anticipation, and imagined futures (Ricoeur, 1984).

These perspectives allow music to be understood as social and cultural action rather than simply as a communication instrument. The study uses *Performing Futures* to describe how musical performances connect present conduct—particularly choices concerning sexuality, protection, disclosure, and care—to imagined consequences and possible futures.

Methodologically, the study employs qualitative interpretive analysis of Mozambican popular music and audiovisual materials, complemented by contextual interviews with selected artists. The interviews with Aniano Tamele, Mingas, and Roberto Xitsondo informed contextual interpretation but are not treated as a separate interview dataset or presented through verbatim quotations.

The corpus consists of Mozambican musical and audiovisual materials produced approximately between 2000 and 2025 and selected for

their engagement with HIV/AIDS, health communication, gender, sexuality, and moral responsibility. It includes *Vidas Positivas*, materials associated with youth-oriented communication initiatives such as *Programa Geração Biz*, and independent works by artists including Aniano Tamele, José Barata, Xidiminguana, Rosália Mboa, Mingas, and Mr. Bow. The corpus therefore includes both established and more contemporary artists. *Somos Iguais* is considered part of the wider communicative environment rather than equivalent to the musical corpus.

The analysis combines thematic and performative approaches. Thematic analysis identified recurring concerns with health communication, gendered voice, responsibility, care, and risk. Performative analysis examined narrative perspective, metaphor, repetition, audience address, emotional register, and representations of gender and sexuality. Three analytical categories emerged: health communication and risk negotiation; gendered voice and moral authority; and performing futures.

Musical texts were treated as culturally situated documents, informed by qualitative approaches to document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003; Rapley, 2011). Attention to different artists, genres, and generations supported a broader interpretive perspective. Reflexivity was also important because interpretation involved Portuguese, Xitsonga, and English, requiring attention to cultural metaphor and linguistic nuance. The study does not include audience reception data or live performance ethnography; consequently, it examines the meanings performed by the selected materials rather than claiming how audiences actually received them.

Performing Futures in Mozambican Popular Music

The analysis shows that HIV is represented not only as a biomedical condition but also as a social and moral concern. Through narrative voice, metaphor, humor, warning, emotional appeal, and direct audience address, musical performances make HIV intelligible within everyday relationships and moral worlds.

Narrative Voice and Health Communication

Vidas Positivas illustrates an early intervention-oriented approach in which HIV is communicated through narrative. The story of Constantino, who contracts HIV following unprotected sexual relationships, transforms health information into a moral narrative about behaviour, reflection, and responsibility. The male voice is particularly significant because it places responsibility within a masculine narrative rather than presenting HIV prevention only through externally imposed instruction.

Kapa Dech's *Choose Life, Take Care* similarly uses repetition and direct exhortation to position listeners as participants in decisions affecting their futures. Jeremias Nguenha's *Hayekani Massango* combines vivid imagery with direct audience address, creating urgency around HIV and personal protection.

Other performances shift from individual responsibility toward relational and communal forms of address. Aniano Tamele's *Sida Nhandayeyo* ("HIV, Help Us") uses the collective appeal "HIV, help us / HIV, get out from us," transforming HIV into a shared social concern. José Barata's *Malume* ("Uncle") personifies HIV through a familiar relational figure, making risk socially recognizable. Mr. Bow's *HIV* uses direct appeals to encourage testing and treatment, embedding biomedical guidance within an accessible performance register.

These examples show that health communication is not limited to the transfer of information. The songs construct relationships between speaker and listener and between individual conduct and collective responsibility.

Gendered Mediation and Moral Authority

The corpus also demonstrates that HIV communication is gendered. Gendered representations include women's vulnerability, disclosure, stigma, and care, while masculine voices may reproduce, question, or challenge assumptions about sexuality and prevention.

Rosália Mboa's *Jeito* is particularly significant because its title itself creates a culturally meaningful wordplay. The song combines references to protection with appeals to responsible behaviour and moderation. The metaphor of "the chicken that died from abundance" critiques excessive desire, transforming prevention into a reflection on pleasure, excess, and responsibility.

Jeito has a double significance in the Mozambican context. It refers to a condom brand, but *jeito* also means a way or manner of doing something. Everyday expressions such as *usa jeito* ("do it with care" or "use the proper way") and *brinca com jeito* ("play/do it carefully") invoke the idea of doing something appropriately. In the context of sexual relations, the wordplay connects the material protection of the condom with the manner in which sexual relations should be conducted—with care, moderation, and responsibility. The song therefore links biomedical prevention to an everyday moral vocabulary rather than presenting condom use as an isolated technical instruction.

Xidiminguana's *Sida Ngatimuni* dramatizes uncertainty, fear, and stigma through dialogic narration. Questions such as "Sida Ngatimuni?" ("What kind of blood is HIV?") and "Nita dwela mani?" ("Whom will I tell?") foreground uncertainty surrounding diagnosis and disclosure. The movement between bush and city in *Nibaleki, niya nhlaveni… niya doropeni, swilhula mpimo* ("I ran to the bush… I went to the city and it is even worse") further conveys vulnerability across different social spaces.

The song also stages a resistant masculine voice questioning condom use: "Eu Xidiminguana não uso preservativo… se usarmos preservativo ainda vamos procriar? Eu não tomo banho com capa de chuva…" ("I, Xidiminguana, do not use condoms… if we use condoms will we still reproduce? I do not bathe with a raincoat…"). Rather than treating this statement as the artist's straightforward endorsement of risk, the performance can be read as staging a familiar discourse of masculine resistance to prevention. The song thereby exposes tensions surrounding sexuality, pleasure, reproduction, bodily protection, and public health.

Mingas's *Xini xiku xlhupaku* ("From What You Are Suffering") shifts the register toward emotional support. Suffering is presented as a shared social experience, foregrounding resilience, hope, and collective care. Together, these performances demonstrate that musical voices can reproduce, negotiate, and challenge gendered forms of moral authority.

Intergenerational Imaginaries and Performing Futures

The corpus also reveals a temporal dimension to HIV communication. Earlier intervention-oriented materials often emphasize caution, behavioural responsibility, and prevention, while other performances foreground emotional support, relational care, and reflection on suffering and its consequences.

The presence of established and more contemporary artists makes visible both continuities and shifts in how sexuality, responsibility, illness, and care are articulated. *Sida Nhandayeyo* and *Malume*, for example, emphasize relational responsibility, while *Jeito* and *Sida Ngatimuni* use metaphor and dramatic voice to negotiate prevention, desire, stigma, and vulnerability.

Performing Futures captures this connection between present conduct and anticipated consequences. Repeated exhortations such as "choose life, take care," together with metaphors of protection, excess, suffering, and responsibility, situate immediate choices within broader individual, familial, and collective trajectories.

The future is therefore not presented simply as a distant chronological endpoint. It is produced through present relationships, choices, and forms of responsibility. Music becomes a space in which possible futures are imagined, evaluated, and morally negotiated.

Local Agency and Donor Frameworks

Some of the musical materials emerged within donor-supported or programme-linked HIV initiatives, including *Vidas Positivas* and youth-oriented programmes such as *Programa Geração*

Biz. These initiatives formed part of the broader communicative environment through which HIV messages circulated.

However, institutional objectives are not simply reproduced unchanged. Artists translate health priorities through local metaphors, musical styles, emotional registers, humour, and forms of audience address. *Vidas Positivas* can therefore be understood not only as a programme-related communication product but also as a site where institutional health objectives were mediated through local artistic expression.

This relationship between programme objectives and artistic agency is important because it prevents a simple opposition between "donor messages" and "local culture." The performances show how global health concerns can be reworked through culturally recognizable forms, while independent artists similarly engage HIV through their own moral and artistic vocabularies.

Integration of Cultural, Ethical, and Biomedical Knowledge

Overall, the performances demonstrate that HIV communication is embedded in cultural and moral life. Expressions such as *utafa u siya ulombe* ("you will die and leave sugar—the sweetness of life") in *Malume* and the layered meaning of *jeito* in *Jeito* show how biomedical concerns are mediated through metaphor and everyday language.

Music consequently operates simultaneously as health communication, moral reflection, and affective expression. It does not simply tell audiences what HIV is or what they should do. It also raises questions about who is responsible, how sexuality should be conducted, how suffering is understood, how care should be expressed, and what consequences present actions may have.

The cultural work of these performances therefore lies in making HIV socially intelligible. This is where *Performing Futures* contributes analytically: it shows how musical performance connects health communication with gendered relationships, moral responsibility, and imagined individual and collective futures.

Conclusions

Mozambican popular music functions as a performative arena in which HIV is negotiated as both a biomedical and social-moral concern. Through narrative voice, metaphor, repetition, humor, and direct audience address, songs translate health concerns into culturally intelligible forms while negotiating gendered responsibility, sexuality, care, and stigma.

The analysis shows that musical performances do not simply reproduce public health messages. They interpret and reshape them through local languages, metaphors, relationships, and moral vocabularies. Gendered representations include women's vulnerability, disclosure, stigma, and care, while masculine voices can reproduce, negotiate, or challenge assumptions surrounding sexuality and prevention.

The concept of *Performing Futures* captures how these performances connect present conduct to anticipated individual, familial, and collective consequences. Across generations of artists, musical narratives emphasize prevention, ethical reflection, relational care, and responsibility, while also exposing tensions surrounding pleasure, masculinity, stigma, and bodily protection.

The study therefore positions Mozambican popular music as more than a channel for health information. It is a cultural and performative space in which biomedical knowledge is interpreted, moral authority is negotiated, and possible futures are imagined. This perspective highlights the value of culturally and gender-sensitive approaches to HIV communication and demonstrates how music can connect present health practices with broader ethical and intergenerational concerns in Mozambique.

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Rhythms of Power: Popular Music, Youth Culture, and Political Mobilization during Elections in Zimbabwe

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Popular music in Zimbabwe operates simultaneously as a symbolic resource of political authority and as a medium through which dissent, ambiguity, and critique are articulated. Genres such as Zimdancehall, sungura, and urban pop command strong youth followings, positioning musicians as influential cultural intermediaries during electoral periods. Drawing on qualitative textual and discourse analysis (lyrics, videos, performances, media coverage), 30 semi-structured interviews with musicians, political actors, and youth audiences, and digital ethnography of social media platforms, this paper examines how music is mobilized and interpreted during elections. The analysis shows that ruling elites primarily deploy music as affective symbolism, through performances, honours, and association with popular artists, to project legitimacy and youth inclusion rather than to communicate substantive programmes. By contrast, opposition supporters and audiences appropriate musically ambiguous narratives as expressions of social critique rather than explicit partisan mobilization. Youth audiences play a central interpretive role, engaging music as a language of recognition and emotional expression while maintaining distance from formal party politics. Popular music thus reshapes the symbolic terrain of elections without producing predictable political outcomes; interpretation, circulation, and meaning slippage are central to cultural politics in constrained electoral environments.

In Zimbabwe, popular music is not only entertainment but also a vehicle for circulating political ideas, identities, and affiliations. As in other African contexts marked by constrained civic space and limited access to formal participation, popular culture assumes particular political significance because affective and symbolic communication often substitutes for institutional channels (Barber 2018). In Zimbabwe, music has long been intertwined with struggles over authority and legitimacy, from mobilization during the liberation struggle to regulation and appropriation in the post-independence era (Thram 2006; Vambe and Vambe 2006; Mano 2007; Khan 2021).

Early scholarship foregrounded Chimurenga music's embedding of nationalist narratives in everyday practice and its contribution to mobilization (Makombe 2021). After independence, the state institutionalized patriotic culture to reaffirm liberation credentials and consolidate legitimacy, while musicians developed indirect strategies to navigate censorship and constraint. Research on protest music shows how artists articulate grievance and critique under repression, but it often centers artistic intention and lyrical content, treating meaning as relatively stable and aligned with either state ideology or resistance. Youth-focused studies complicate this assumption: work on urban grooves and Zimdancehall shows that music shapes youth identity amid economic precarity and prolonged 'waithood', yet expressive engagement does not automatically translate into mobilization (Tivenga 2018; Gukurume 2022). Digital media research further reveals how songs circulate across platforms and accrue multiple, contested meanings (Ureke 2024).

Less attention has been paid to elections as intensified moments of cultural mobilization and to the interpretive role of young audiences. Centering interpretation, circulation, and generational distance, this paper argues that popular music reshapes the symbolic terrain of Zimbabwean elections without determining political outcomes.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative design. Data were generated through textual and discourse analysis of selected song lyrics, music videos, live performances, and media coverage linked to electoral campaigns, complemented by semi-structured interviews with 30 participants (musicians, political actors, and youth audiences). Participants were purposively sampled to capture diverse perspectives on music, politics, and youth engagement. To account for contemporary modes of circulation, digital ethnography examined how musical content was shared, interpreted, and debated on YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok during election periods. Data were analyzed thematically, focusing on political symbolism, affective mobilization, audience interpretation, and negotiations of power across cultural and digital spaces. Ethical protocols included informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to political risk in constrained environments.

Music and State Symbolic Power during Elections

Facing generational distance from liberation-era symbolism, state actors increasingly aligned with contemporary musicians who command large youth followings. Zimdancehall and urban-pop artists are invited to campaign launches, rallies, and commemorations, where their presence signals youth inclusion and cultural relevance. These appearances function effectively rather than programmatically, projecting proximity without substantive policy communication. As one senior campaign organizer noted, inviting popular artists draws young people in large numbers and suggests that the party 'understands current culture.' Youth responses, however, reveal ambivalence: many attend for the artist, not the party, and leave after the performance without further political engagement.

Symbolic incorporation through state honours illustrates the same dynamic. The designation of prominent artists as national heroes is read by some as cultural celebration, by others as an attempt to align popular cultural capital with state legitimacy. Overall, the state's engagement with musicians operates primarily at the level of spectacle: music enhances visibility, produces affective proximity, and signals generational relevance, yet youth audiences distinguish cultural appreciation from partisan allegiance; political power remains contingent rather than determinative.

Opposition Mobilization and Cultural Ambiguity

Opposition politics engages music under different structural constraints: limited access to state-controlled media and risks associated with overt messaging curb direct endorsements. Consequently, music circulates less through formal alignment and more through appropriation, reinterpretation, and symbolic use by supporters. Particular songs become associated with opposition sentiment regardless of the artist's stated position. Youth activists described adopting tracks that reference corruption, inequality, or suffering as rally soundtracks because the lyrics resonate with lived experience. Yet interpretations vary: the same metaphor is read by some as pointed critique of leaders and by others as broader social commentary.

Digital circulation intensifies polysemy. During election periods, songs are shared on WhatsApp statuses and TikTok videos overlaid with images of rallies or economic hardship; captions are often unnecessary. In this context, music becomes coded commentary that reduces exposure to risk. But mobilization remains unstable: emotional resonance enables identification more than it produces coordinated action. Opposition mobilization through music thus operates symbolically rather than organizationally.

Youth Interpretation and Political Distance

Young audiences are central to the political significance of music during elections. Genres such as Zimdancehall resonate because they voice unemployment, informal labour, and everyday pressure. Identification stems from recognition rather than partisan alignment: listeners distinguish social critique from electoral endorsement, and

many express mistrust of formal party politics. Sharing songs online functions as expressive signaling without explicit declaration; music 'says something without saying it directly'. Engagement is communicative and affective rather than programmatic, limiting the capacity of political actors to convert cultural popularity into electoral certainty.

Digital platforms multiply and transform meanings. A track performed at a campaign event may later trend on TikTok with captions and visuals that reframe it as social critique; comment threads debate whether the post is 'about the government' or 'just about life.' Once songs enter digital networks, their meanings detach from original contexts and become available for remix, parody, and selective sharing according to users' experiences. Circulation, rather than origin, produces political significance. This helps explain why musical association yields no predictable electoral outcome even when both state and opposition seek to harness it.

Conclusion

Popular music during elections in Zimbabwe functions less as a linear instrument of mobilization and more as a contested symbolic resource whose significance is constantly renegotiated. State actors deploy music to project generational relevance and legitimacy, while youth audiences separate cultural enjoyment from partisan commitment. Opposition supporters adopt songs as vehicles of critique, yet usage remains expressive rather than organizational. Music produces affective intensity without guaranteeing alignment because it operates through metaphor, resonance, and shared experience, qualities that expand reach while preventing ideological closure. As songs circulate across digital platforms, their meanings fragment and transform, making political outcomes contingent. Rather than asking whether music mobilizes voters, it is more productive to examine how it reshapes the symbolic terrain within which electoral competition unfolds.

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Rethinking Laughter: Comedy as a space for political contestation in Uganda

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In July 2020, the Kampala-based comedy troupe Bizonto released a series of satirical skits titled "Musomese Abaana" ("Teach the Children").[1] Framed as a lighthearted lesson about Uganda's top officeholders, the sketches highlight how the highest ranks of government are disproportionately occupied by leaders from a single region. The effect is double-edged: the audience laughs, but the laughter also carries a pointed critique of representation and governance. When the Bizonto were subsequently arrested, it underscored that the amusement produced by comedy can become a politically salient act; those targeted by the joke do hear its message.

Like many African countries, Uganda faces rampant unemployment and widespread poverty. A new generation of comedians has emerged to entertain, to satirize worsening conditions, and to mock political excess. I conceptualize this laughter as resistance. Much stand-up and sketch comedy prods audiences to resist the precariousness to which they are subjected. In this sense, political comedy becomes a collective form of resistance—a way for the marginalized to 'bite back' without resorting to violence—operating as a 'hidden transcript' and a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott 1985).

This paper argues that comedy, through laughter, fosters bonds among disgruntled audiences who confront precarity, intensifying police power, and the state's retreat from its governing role. The laughter evoked is not merely affect; it is satirical and purposive—an expression of discontent and, at times, protest. Drawing on contemporary Ugandan skits, I show comedy's potential to ease tensions, dissolve fear, and create the kind of connection in which audiences "bracket their individual interest and their social status" (Habermas 1992, 181) to form a public sphere capable of collective action. I use critical discourse analysis of text, video, and audio to illustrate how comedians align audiences as the 'oppressed' and mock the 'oppressor.' From this analysis, I conclude that audience laughter is a unifying practice with which the disgruntled resist power.

The Politics of Comedy in Uganda

Comedy is a genre that, through humor, imitates ordinary human foibles to induce laughter. Its satirical edge can challenge social and political arrangements with the aim of provoking change. In Ugandan comedy, themes of supremacy, imperialism, dictatorship, and authoritarianism recur. I highlight these dynamics in three interlinked ways—educating, criticizing, and appealing to emotion—through which comedy opens a platform for discussion, builds a more informed audience, and evokes a desire for change.

First, comedy educates by foregrounding everyday injustices. Audiences are not oblivious to these wrongs, but hearing them named publicly can shift perception. By making the political elite appear ridiculous, comedians invite audiences to recognize themselves as a community of the marginalized, poor, and socially humiliated. In this way, comedy exposes social flaws and challenges convention, generating a venue for social commentary.

For example, in the "Musomese Abaana" series, the Bizonto playfully exhort citizens to pray for leaders tasked with organizing a free and fair election, while reminding viewers that the country's 'top' officials—especially in security, electoral administration, and finance—hail predominantly from Western Uganda. They even quipped that these officials may face the daunting task of advising President Museveni to relinquish power if he loses. Police subsequently described the video as an 'attack on government' and the comedians as 'errant characters' posing 'grave threats to the security and stability of the country'.[2] Such

branding of comedians illustrates their other role – critics of power.

Their arrests coincided with new state regulations to control the creative arts—rules widely perceived as punitive in a sector that had nurtured the leading opposition figure, Kyagulanyi Robert Sentamu (Bobi Wine), who was barred from performing publicly for more than two years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government banned rallies, yet President Museveni leveraged his office to hold de facto campaign events framed as inaugurations of public projects. In this closed political space, laughter became one of the few remaining avenues of collective expression.

For instance, a 2024 sketch by the Fun Factory troupe, commonly referenced as 'Where Is the Next Taxi?,' turns on a single prop: a safari hat. A taxi operator wearing the hat—associated in Uganda with the incumbent ('the Old Man with a Hat')—struggles to attract passengers. Riders insist on boarding the "next" taxi; only when he discards the hat do they return. The operator then flings the hat away, muttering kabulangane ('to hell'), to the audience's delight.[3] Audience members shout "Temukubye nyo" (Isn't the ridicule too much?), while many post laughing emojis online. A colleague in the sketch points to the abandoned hat and warns "wenyweze" (hold tight), a barbed message to the Old Man with the Hat that the tide of resistance is strong.[4]

In response to another joke by Trevor Noah on Uganda's 2016 presidential elections,[5] many Ugandans post laughing emojis indicating that they do find the skit funny. But beyond the fun, Treavor displays what the real situation in Uganda is. His cynical remarks such as the luxury of a presidential candidate campaigning while seated on a couch on top of a car gets Ugandans to deeply think about the reality before them. In their comments, viewers show their awareness of the fact that for someone who was arrested four times during election week, this was indeed not luxury. In a display of what the skit makes them feel, a viewer comments, "I am so glad to watch the daily show, NOT that funny but exposes our election problems …. That's Uganda and proud to be Ugandan but the government really annoys."[6] Comedy appeals to audience emotions and this opens an avenue for them to express their feelings.

Central to this paper is the lasting impression this joke leaves on the audience. After the 2021 elections, a viewer refers to this joke pointing out that the national elections that had just been concluded were worse, "There is a lot of police and military brutality in Uganda. So much has happened since the M&-Besigye saga. This time it is with freedom fighter Hon. Kyagulanyi. We need jokes about this." Another viewer appeals to the comedian, "Trevor, you need to do another comedy on Museveni. 2021 elections have been worse than 2016." However, the joke appeals to the audience's rationality by prompting them to wonder if Besigye would actually be better; whether he might not want his people to continue in power. Such rationality demonstrates the influence comedy has on audiences. It enables them to understand their real problem and how they could overcome it. By performing this role, comedy becomes a 'weapon' with which the 'weak' audience contests and resists oppressive power structures.

Laughter as a Response to the Performative Power of Comedy

Comedy is performance. When a set lands, audiences laugh, cheer, and clap; when it fails, they boo, jeer, or walk out. Performance thus gathers strangers into a temporary public capable of thinking and acting together (Anderson 1983). Laughter is not only a response to content; it is a performative act in its own right that ridicules, mocks, provokes, and disavows. As a signal, laughter tells its targets that something is amiss. A performance forges bonds and heightens awareness of shared conditions (Barber 2007, 139). In this coming together, social, economic, and ethnic walls can momentarily drop; a "public sphere" emerges in which people engage in "rational-critical" debate (Habermas 1992, 181). That space can catalyze collective sentiments into collective action that contests and resists oppressive state structures.

Accordingly, I argue that beyond entertainment, comedians use humor to prompt dialogue and

reflection on social realities. Following Barber (2007, 174), audiences are not passive recipients; they must analyze a joke to grasp its intended meaning. As speech-act theory suggests, the uptake of an utterance is context-sensitive (Austin 1989; Searle 1971). Derrida reminds us that although meaning is context-bound, context is ultimately elusive (Derrida 1988, 12–15). Still, listeners typically discern a speaker's intended force, and that perceived intention shapes their response. A joke, then, functions as a kind of speech act—a call to resist, a summons to action.

Conclusion

In Uganda today, comedy serves as a mode of resistance: comedians unsettle state power by ridiculing systems and individuals who command authority. Many target political elites not merely to elicit laughter but to register defiance against corruption and misrule. Humor thus becomes more than a way for the oppressed to 'get even'; it is also an assurance that 'we have spoken, and they have listened.' At the same time, an emergent culture of flattery and strategic silence—born of economic precarity and risk—can draw performers toward sycophancy. These tensions mark the constraints under which Ugandan comedians operate and the ingenuity with which they keep carving out a space for critique.

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Endnotes

1 Bizonto Comedy, 'Musomese Abaana' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8EPDlCRk94, July 24, 2020. A satirical sketch teaching children the names of top officeholders; the gag is the revelation of regional concentration among elites.
2 Police characterization quoted from *The New Vision* (Uganda), July 26, 2020, 12.
3 Fun Factory Uganda, 'Where Is the Next Taxi?' [YouTube video], performed and posted in March 2024. The safari hat is popularly associated with the incumbent president ('the Old Man with a Hat').
4 Conversation with a member of the audience after the show in which the sketch was performed at National Theatre on Thursday March 7, 2024 (personal communication).
5 The Daily Show, Uganda – Even Worse at Elections Than America, [YouTube video], posted on February 23, 2016. Trevor describes the circumstances under which Uganda's incumbent president, Yoweri Museveni, has been elected to his fifth term, sarcastically remarking that his main opponent is his former personal doctor, Kizza Besigye.
6 Comment on the YouTube video by one of the viewers

A Close Look at the Obscene Protest Song of the Gen Z-led 2025 Uprising in Madagascar

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> "And where there is oppression, there will be resistance." (Shakur and Davis 2016).

From September 25 to October 14, 2025, Madagascar went through an uprising, led by the Gen Z Madagascar socio-political movement (Savage 2025). On social media and on the street, people were screaming and singing "Miala p**ry Rajoelina,"* which can be translated into: *"Rajoelina, get the f*** out" (The Independent 2025). This song uses offensive language towards the former president. Whilt this may seem as a degenerescence to some people, this song is actually a multi-layered tool of political resistance. This essay explores the political use of this protest song as a strategy against the ruling class or the social order. Public videos in TikTok and newspapers became a laboratory to analyze the song. This study is innovative in the sense that it focuses specifically on the case of Madagascar and on this song to have a broader understanding of the recent uprising. It places the song within the traditional music genre *vaky sova*. It advocates that the song is intertwined with of the 1972 revolution. Moreover, it shows why this anthem is so powerful and important for the future of resistance in Madagascar. But this analysis also reflects on the weakness of this song. Multiple concepts emerged in this analysis: mnemonic bridging through protest song, political swearing, and repertoire of contention. This protest song goes deeper than its funny appearance.

Far from being a movement composed exclusively of young people born between 1997 and 2012, the Gen-Z movement involved the participation of various groups of people from different backgrounds, generations, and class. This includes urban youth, medics, workers, civil society organization members, university students, and social media influencers. The name Gen Z emerged from an inspiration by the Gen Z movement in Nepal. Most organizations that participated in the uprising of September 2025 took that name, afterwards, as did movements in other countries such as Morocco. What ignited the protests was the inability of the government to provide water and electricity. Following the protests, the president of the Republic, Andry Rajoelina, flew out of the country. It is believed that he was taken out of power, simultaneously, by the pressure of the movement, the military, the national assembly, and the constitutional high court.

This essay explores one of the most significant parts of the protest: the use of the song: "Miala p*ry Rajoelina".*[3] More graphically, the word "p**ry" derived from the word "f**ry" which, un modern malagasy language, literally means "vulva." This expression is used as a slur in Malagasy. The melody used in this chant is from another revolutionary song, "Ampitapitao" from the 1972 uprising which led to the collapse of the first Republic of Madagascar, after the end of colonization. It is fascinating how this obscene and crude adaptation of a revolutionary melody became the anthem of a new generations of youth protesters. What can the analysis of this anthem tell us about the culture of resistance and strategies of the 2025 youth-led movement in Madagascar?

The source of this new adaptation of the song is unclear. All we know is that it was quickly spread all across social media platforms and chanted during marches all over the major cities of Madagascar. This analysis focuses on studying the trends of the song on TikTok, actualized by early January 2026. The key words "Miala p*ry Rajoelina" were used, both in the search bar and in the music search. I closely examined the lyrics, the music genre, and the political affiliation of the posters, using a qualitative method for data gathering and analysis. I begin with tackling the musical genre

by presenting the *vaky sova*, its origins and how it relates to 1972. I then present the use of obscenity or swearing as a political strategy of rupture and resistance. And the last part focuses on the lyrics of this protest song and how it translates politically.

The *Vaky Sova*: A Tool for Mnemonic Bridging of Youth-Led Uprising Against Neocolonial State

There are a lot of similarities between the 1972 and 2025 uprisings. Both of them involved youth mass movements. It is striking that both deployed the same genre of anthems, using the *vaky sova*, also called *sova*. The *sova* is a musical genre that re-emerged and gained political use during the student-led Revolution of 1972, to rally protesters (*Midi Madagasikara* 2024*)*. It is a rhythmic mix of poetry and song "reached at his suprême expression." (Rakibolana Sy Rakipahalalana Malagasy : Sova, n.d.). It is performed in groups and is a form of collective oral art, usually followed with hand clapping and dance. It is usually performed a capella but can also be followed by a guitar or traditional instruments. The *vaky sova* originated from the Tsimihety ethnic group but was also performed in the highlands (Rado 2022). The *vaky sova* is a way for people to denounce oppression and talk about what is happening in the Malagasy society. Diverse political thematics are covered: poverty, patriotism, corruption, and political shenanigans (tiasyraconte, 2018). Some of its artists even consider it as a way to do "journalism by song" (Newsmada, n.d.). Moreover, the *vaky sova* is usually associated with the poor or those at the opposite end of the ruling class. By reclaiming it in the recent uprising, the movement is associating itself to the masses and its struggle against the "tsindrin-tsaranga" or "class oppression" (Gyre, 2016). The *sova* is and can be an authentic Malagasy cultural marker in protest and resistance, always performed in Malagasy, which can help build an identity around contestation.

The use of a modern interpretation of the song "Ampitapitao" was not a random choice. The *sova* has not been a mainstream cultural form for decades. The protestors intentionally adopted this form as a strategy to link the 2025 uprising to a previous one. Therefore, this anthem constitutes a tool of mnemonic bridging, which is a way to link "non-contiguous points in history by establishing a connection that allows them to almost touch one another" (Zarubavel 2003: 41). Mnemonic bridging is an illusion created by a community, for which the militant protestors were responsible.

Bridging the two protests was a key strategic move by protestors. Since its independence on paper, Madagascar had gone through a cycle of political crisis. This manifested into an overthrow of the government every few years. But what makes the uprising of 1972 and 2025 stand out is that they are targeting the complicit government, and began almost the exact same way with the important involvement of youth and students. Linking the protest of 2025 to the protest of 1972 effectively asserted that the latest struggle has a historical legitimacy and is the direct heritage of previous revolutionary movements. In this case, the process of mnemonic bridging focuses on who led the uprising and why.

Other protests in Madagascar between 1972 and 2025 were mainly led by charismatic individuals that wanted political power for themselves, or done in a less revolutionary way. For instance, the political movement that followed in 1993 was considered a peaceful departure of the president Ratsiraka (Gow 1997). In 2002, the mayor Marc Ravalomanana stood out and took over the presidency of the country. In 2009, the mayor Andry Rajoelina followed the exact same path. And so on until 2025. The mnemonic bridging therefore had the goal of signaling that this protest was different from those episodic political eruptions and instead targeted the legitimacy of the political regime. Not only does using this strategy amplify the legitimacy of the movement, it also enables an emotional reaction from different generations of militants against authoritarian states. This ties the young political militants from Gen Z who are aware of the history of this anthem to the previous generation of youth that participated massively in the overthrow of a neocolonial government in 1972.

The Use of Swearing: A Radical Political Act

Directly after hearing hands clapping, everybody gets active and prepares to sing the "Miala p*ry Rajoelina." From that very moment, it is already known that protestation will follow. In the end, even though this protest song draws from the past, there is a clear rupture, with the political use of obscenity. The 2025 protest song is just swearing, on repeat, with no other lyrics attached to it. When singing it, some mix the lyrics with those of "Ampitapitao." This use of offensive language is a well-documented Gen-Z or youth political and cultural strategy.

It is even more powerful in Madagascar's context. A swear that targets the president is a direct attack to his "hasina," which is a sacred ancestral power, believed to legitimize rulers in Madagascar's traditional culture. This "hasina" demands respect and is based on the idea of holiness of the ruler. Disrespect becomes a way to shake political power and moral authority. As a matter of fact, the new government of transition published, in early January, an announcement of legal prosecution of anybody that uses swearing to express themselves politically or give political analysis, especially on online platforms. According to that press release signed by the chief of staff of the presidency on January 8, it targets that exact *hasina* inherent to humans, therefore targeting and disrespecting the *hasina* of the institutions that the person is incarnating.

Such swearing is fundamentally an act to denigrate the supreme figure of authority, in the Republic. Thus, this act constitutes a form of insubordination and resistance. Niyi Akingbe (2024) pointed out: "insults … enable a transgression of prevailing societal ethics as a reaction to irresponsible governance." In his analysis, citizens shouldn't adhere to political correctness anymore if the government doesn't respect standards of democratic practices and conformity to the Constitution and laws and legality protect the ruling class and its interest. Political correctness and the use of swearing should also prevail the moment the government is unable to meet the material needs of its citizens.

Using obscenity and provocative language is a way for young people in an oppressive situation to externalize and show their anger, rage, as well as frustration (Kirui 2025: 6). As an emotive, not only is political swearing a way of communicating and expressing emotions, it also manufactures them (Chew 2025). That last statement is particularly important because it emphasizes the role of swearing in organizing and rallying protesters by enabling strong feelings in those who swear. This main emotion is anger, which facilitates the recruitment of participants and sustains protests (Monforte 2021). By the end of 2025, I had collected 1715 videos using the song. Thus, another key point that must be discussed is the effectiveness of using social media platforms for activism in Madagascar, especially political activism.

With 4.15 million social media users in Madagascar, virality becomes a key to rally more and more people for protest or a strategy. The use of humor amplifies virality and attraction on social media, as well as on the streets during protests. Humor helps protestors to bond with each other and with the movement (Euverman 2022). The "get the f*** out" is considered a form of humor. Multiple content creators on TikTok use the song in a funny way. For instance, a creator modified the picture of Andry Rajoelina to make it appear like he was on a DJ set with the protest song in the background. Another one jokes about using this song for his future wedding. Additionally, swearing, as a political act, is a form of regular resistance (Chew 2025: 77). It empowers the movement and is an excellent strategy to grab people's attention (Chew 2025: 88). So, swearing in a political way is a very powerful and effective strategy to grow and maintain a political movement, especially a protest. And this facilitates the amplification by social media.

Beyond an Apparent "Lack of Depth": The Gen Z Repertoire and Culture of Resistance

Swearing is a form of resistance. But analyzing the political aspect of the lyrics can also help us understand the culture of resistance and the repertoire of the Gen Z Madagascar movement.

At first glance, one could argue that it lacks a political depth compared to "Ampitapitao." It doesn't give a political explanation nor analysis of what is happening and isn't rooted in any clear political ideology. No political program nor any consideration of what should happen next could be found in the new protest song, which demands to just remove one guy and that's it. For "Ampitapitao," the lyrics are clearly inspired by leftist movements that spread all around Africa at the time, focusing on giving the power to the people and opposing the state army. So, while the protest song of 1972 can be considered more collective and programmatic, the anthem of 2025 is more focused on tackling an individual, rather than calling out a systemic issue. And that is even if protesters have "no idea [of] who should replace him" (The Independent 2025).

But far from being a lack of strategy, this is a well-known repertoire of contention. The Gen Z movement is betting on neutrality as a form of political strategy. By refusing to have a defined ideology, the movement can rally everybody that was discontent with the previous regime, to their cause and to the protests. It uses negative solidarity by targeting a common enemy rather than presenting a political program. This is already a form of a collective identity construction by identifying a common enemy to the movement (Chew 2025: 83). On the surface, it may seem that the common enemy is Andry Rajoelina, but he actually is only the representation of a specific class: the elite and the bourgeoisie.

Several Malagasy political analysts prefer the use of the term "elite" to qualify those who have influence and power over decisions and how the Malagasy society works (Razafindrakoto et al, 2026). But this elite remains the ruling class composed of the bourgeoisie, *andriana* and *hova*, who has been the same since the independence of Madagascar (Razafindrakoto et al, 2026). The call for Andry Rajoelina to get out becomes a call to make the ruling class leave power. As a matter of fact, during the protests, the youth also asked for the capitalist Mamy Ravatomanga to get out, as well as Rajoelina's *forongony*. This protest song becomes a powerful manifestation of a fight against not only the president but the entire ruling class. This shadows directly the uprising of 1972. Everybody can identify themselves with this protest song. The leftists recognize the use of a revolutionary song, the liberals and more conservative will be drawn by the non-affiliation to a specific ideology and political party. Thus, this protest song allows a convergence of different actors towards one, unique, and shared goal.

The anthem is still used to enable certain types of emotions among young people. One TikTok video, that reached 2858 likes and 409 shares in 6 days after being posted, stated: "if you think that you failed your 2025 remember the sweet melody of victory." That is a clear attempt to enable pride among protesters and the youth. According to political sociologists, focusing on pride is a known strategy to fight the "feeling of isolation, humiliation and fear" (Monforte 2021: 448). This is particularly important in the case of Madagascar where divisions among the people are getting bigger. The youth are less enthusiastic in going to the street again. This protest song has become a vector of memory and a tool to foster political engagement and resistance. And what is very amazing about this use of the anthem is that it is not the action of a political party or a political figure but from everyday social media users.

Another use of this anthem is in a more fun setting. This song was streamed in dance clubs all over the capital, especially during special occasions. This was the case in most of the New Year's celebrations for 2026. From all of this, it is clear that this song is politically anchored and constitutes a powerful strategy to rally the majority of people against the ruling class. The Gen-Z repertoire of contention includes using the protest song to enable strong emotions and maintain the fire spirit of the movement.

Conclusion

"Music also plays a key role in shaping collective memory and emotional resonance in protest cultures" (RaNa, 2020: 496). The use of *vaky sova* allows a direct link between the 1972 and 2025 uprising. The use of an offensive language

is an incredible way to rally people, enable and manufacture anger, but also do insubordination. Moreover, the song has a deep political meaning even though it may seem superficial at first. The protesters reinvented the *vaky sova* by using obscene language, linking it to modern culture and a new way to do political activism and cyberactivism. We can see the emergence of a rude *vaky sova* genre.

Unfortunately, the use of the specific swear "*p*ry*" remains problematic because of its misogynistic and sexist character. This terminology implies that what is related to the vulva is derogatory. So, the youth protesters are facing a new challenge. They are called to use more progressive forms of swearing, therefore doing "feminist linguistic activism" (Laugesen 2019). That form of activism consists of changing the speech as a broader act to change cultural attitudes (Laugesen 2019). In Madagascar's context, this is more complicated than what one could think. In trying to do an exercise with fellow Malagasy, we realized that there is no equivalent of the word "pry" in terms of its grammatical use. This terminology is mostly used to accompany an action or a verb.

Even though this protest song shows clear roots in resistance movements, we can't overcome the fact that it does not offer a positive political project yet. After the uprising of 2025, this has led to some actors capturing the movements from the hand of the Gen Z Madagascar. The tension is going up and nothing seems to go towards the end of the ruling of the economic and political elite. It is obvious that the protest song is a reflection of the socio-political movement.

In the end, this analysis presents certain limits. It does not use a quantitative methodology to show the actual reach nor the impact of the protest song. Moreover, it has not yet been corroborated by interviews with protesters. Finally, this is a case study of the Gen Z-led protest in Madagascar; it lacks a comparative approach with other Gen Z-led movements, in Africa and all over the world. But we have to bear in mind that one of the main characteristics of systemic oppression, such as capitalism, and the ruling class is their ability to adapt and use tools that historically emerged from the working class or any oppressed group into maintaining oppression. Those benefiting from oppression have taken over symbols of resistance to sell products and even manifest as a falsified progress to ease critics against capitalism (Prodnik 2023). The use of this protest song in nightclubs may be an early sign of this reappropriation of resistance tools to a capitalistic end. All of that leads to a question: How to prevent that the rude *vaky sova* be captured and used by the ruling class against the masses?

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Made in Ghana: Fashion Entrepreneurship, Informality, and African Futures

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African fashion has moved from the margins to increased global visibility. This shift is sustained through locally embedded systems of production, exchange, and distribution that underpin the *Made in Ghana* fashion economy. This paper examines how local and informal networks shape fashion entrepreneurship in Ghana by influencing access to materials, labour, and markets, while enabling designers to navigate precarity and exercise creative agency in everyday work. Drawing on ethnographic research and interviews with forty fashion entrepreneurs in Kumasi and Tamale, the study shows that production, supply, marketing, and distribution are organized through dense local networks of artisans, traders, and informal intermediaries, offering flexibility while reproducing uncertainty. Trust-based relationships, informal channels such as portmanteau, and mobile phones and social media enable coordination across distance. *Made in Ghana* fashion demonstrates how collective creative agency sustains livelihoods, strengthens local networks, and contributes to culturally embedded African futures.

Ghana's creative industry has cultivated a vibrant fashion culture by functioning as a crossroads for the exchange of dress practices among local production networks, informal economies, creative and non-creative enterprises, and wider global and diasporic fashion communities (Richards, 2022). To contextualize these dynamics, the paper situates Ghanaian fashion within a longer historical trajectory. Prior to the rise of formal fashion entrepreneurship and digital platforms, fashion production was largely organized through informal, trust-based networks involving tailors, seamstresses, weavers, traders, and apprentices. Clothing was produced locally through family-based and apprenticeship systems and circulated through markets and socially embedded events.

These historically rooted systems shaped not only how clothing was made and circulated, but also how value, identity, and belonging were expressed through dress. In contemporary contexts, such embeddedness allows fashion consumption to function as a form of everyday resistance, in which decisions about what to wear, where to buy, and whom to support carry ethical and political significance. For diasporic communities, these practices operate as acts of cultural remembrance and affiliation, linking local production networks to global circuits of exchange and challenging narratives that position Africa primarily as a site of extraction. This resonates with Ghana's longer history of global encounters through trade and migration, which influenced local dress practices even before mass media. As Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings observes, "people have been fashionable for years in Accra especially even as there was no television" (Richards, 2012).

Such encounters did not displace indigenous fashion systems. Instead, locally grounded dress cultures and production techniques persisted, incorporating external influences such as wax prints into existing craft traditions (Bobie, 2022). This capacity to integrate external influences without eroding local systems continues to shape fashion entrepreneurship today. Fashion entrepreneurs rarely operate in isolation; their practices are embedded in dense networks linking individuals and enterprises across temporal, spatial, and socio-economic boundaries (Brydges, 2018). These local networks mediate how cultural histories, creative practices, and aesthetic innovations are produced and circulated internationally, increasingly through digital and social media connections not addressed in earlier accounts of local production networks (Simmie et al., 1999).

This study shows how such networks transform cultural memory into a resource for imagining new futures. *Made in Ghana* fashion thus functions both as a living archive of cultural identity and as a platform for entrepreneurial practice across

design, production, marketing, distribution, and consumption. By focusing on small, independent fashion enterprises, the paper illuminates the structures and strategies that sustain the industry, extending existing work beyond a primary focus on ethics of care or relationality.

Methodology

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with forty fashion entrepreneurs in Kumasi and Tamale, this study examines how local networks function as strategies for navigating precarious labour conditions. The two cities were selected to capture regional diversity in Ghanaian fashion entrepreneurship. Kumasi, with its rich textile heritage and dense artisan networks, reflects the intersection of traditional craft and contemporary entrepreneurship, while Tamale, in northern Ghana, offers insight into informal, community-based practices shaped by limited resources and strong local ties. These sites provide a North–South perspective on *Made in Ghana* fashion, highlighting how regional context shapes informality and local production networks. Participants varied in age, gender, business experience, and location. Interviews were conducted in sites convenient to participants homes, workshops, showrooms, and markets capturing the rhythms of everyday work. With consent and ethical approval, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically.

Findings

This section examines everyday practices in informal, small-scale fashion entrepreneurship, where individuals often combine designing, production, marketing, and sales into a single workflow (Afun, 2024). Such overlap highlights how informality and networks are deeply intertwined, challenging formal distinctions between local and global production systems. Even in these "one-person" operations, entrepreneurs depend on local networks for essential support, including sourcing materials, addressing technical challenges, and maintaining smooth production and client engagement.

Production

Each day, designers face challenges that demand both precision and creativity. Local networks of peers and colleagues are essential, providing support with complex tasks, sharing tools, and facilitating knowledge exchange. These networks sustain the creative community and allow designers to learn new techniques. For example, a female entrepreneur in Tamale shares her experiences:

> "Even the most skilled designers sometimes need help with tricky styles. In Tamale, it is common to seek guidance from fellow designers, whose familiarity makes collaboration seamless."

She explained:

> "When I struggle with a design, I go to my master's workshop, where I receive guidance, observe techniques, and learn new approaches, turning challenges into opportunities to grow."

In a resource-constrained environment, entrepreneurs often rely on their mentors and community of networks to learn skills and craft techniques, exchanging knowledge freely rather than paying for formal training. A male fashion entrepreneur in Kumasi recounted a similar experience, explaining:

> "I prefer to reach out to a colleague outside Kumasi say Accra or Tarkwa. A simple phone call or video chat can quickly provide the guidance I need. Within hours, we can brainstorm a solution together."

These networks serve as living classrooms, where guidance and hands-on experience foster continuous learning. Distance is rarely a barrier; challenges can often be resolved through phone calls, video chats, or shared photos. Another entrepreneur in Kumasi shared a similar experience:

> "For kaftans and abayas, I rely on a school friend in Tamale who shares his expertise freely. When I need specific patterns, he sends it via STC, and I collect it shortly after."

Digital tools allow peers and mentors to exchange techniques and provide real-time feedback, bridging distance while keeping workflow uninterrupted. Entrepreneurs use these networks strategically, solving some challenges locally and others through distant mentors. Combining traditional networks with digital tools, they enhance adaptability and strengthen the local creative ecosystem.

Supply

In Ghanaian fashion entrepreneurship, supply goes beyond sourcing materials; it is a network connecting designers, artisans, and vendors. Access to quality fabrics and tools often shapes both creativity and profitability. Entrepreneurs who prioritize authenticity increasingly rely on trusted local networks to maintain quality and bridge distances. A female entrepreneur in Tamale shared:

> "Client demands are often urgent and complex, leaving little room for error. I call my supplier in the central market, and if the items are unavailable, I extend the search to Kumasi or Accra. Sending photos helps my contacts identify what I need, and they quickly navigate markets to secure the materials."

It is evident from the excerpt that these networks are the backbone of supply, enabling entrepreneurs to respond to sudden demands and maintain the flow of their business. Another female fashion entrepreneur in Kumasi shared:

> "I received a contract to sew uniforms for the local basic school. Some suggested outsourcing to China to cut costs, but as a leader in my association, I chose to collaborate with local colleagues. This did not only fulfill the contract but also supported the community, providing work for designers, drivers, and others involved in production and logistics."

Choosing the local route reinforced the value of shared growth, demonstrating that business decisions can support both profitability and the sustainability of the local creative ecosystem. Another female fashion entrepreneur in Tamale described how sourcing her fabrics locally has shaped her brand:

> "Although Fatsu is perceived as high-end, I source the best materials from local suppliers rather than cheap imports. While more expensive, these materials are worth the cost. I list my vendors for each production, giving them visibility and enabling designers in Accra to order authentic Northern kente or fugu directly from the source."

She also added:

> "Distance doesn't matter; what matters is the trust, quality, and value embedded in every piece. By relying on these local networks, I do not only sustain my brand but also create opportunities for everyone involved in the production chain."

Entrepreneurs are aware of how their decisions affect other brands and the wider fashion ecosystem. Beyond fashion, their work supports related businesses such as food vendors, transport operators, fabric suppliers, and marketing services generating income both directly and indirectly. A male entrepreneur in Tamale shared:

> "Elections are like my cocoa season, bringing large contracts I cannot handle alone, so I subcontract work to others. Men focus on production, while women handle cooking and market errands. This arrangement benefits everyone in the chain from market vendors to transport operators creating a network of shared economic gain."

This cycle of receiving support and giving back not only strengthens relationships but also helps build, maintain, and sustain both their own brands and the wider network of businesses around them.

Marketing and Distribution

In Ghanaian fashion entrepreneurship, marketing and distribution rely heavily on local networks and referrals. Exporting products often involved

relatives or friends carrying items in their portmanteaux. Today, globalization and digital tools allow entrepreneurs to reach customers across rural, peri-urban, and urban areas, expanding their networks physically and online. A female entrepreneur in Kumasi shared her experience:

> "Sewing is much easier now, but in my days, it was a struggle. Even after making something, getting people to buy it was not simple. We had to rely entirely on friends and loved ones, spreading the word through word of mouth. That was how people learned about your work and they came to trust your brand."

She mentioned that just thinking about it brings back a wave of nostalgia.

> "It was significant when someone traveled to Kejetia saying, "I've heard you're skilled and want to try your work," often referred through a satisfied client."

These visits were more than sales; they conferred respect and recognition, signaling a designer's reputation and the value of their craft. Such encounters highlight the importance of personal networks, word of mouth, and trust. A male entrepreneur in Kumasi shared a similar experience:

> "Before social media and formal export systems, designs crossed borders via portmanteaux friends and relatives traveling abroad would carry garments to clients, relying on trust rather than companies or offices."

Portmanteau, a local term for a traveler's suitcase, served as an informal distribution channel in Ghanaian fashion entrepreneurship. It allowed garments to cross borders without the costs and bureaucracy of formal shipping, relying on trust-based relationships and personal networks. This practice enabled entrepreneurs to extend markets internationally, overcome infrastructural and economic constraints, and strengthen local networks under precarious conditions. A male entrepreneur in Tamale recalled his master's experience from his own apprenticeship days. He shared:

> "The garments for weddings were packed into that luggage and handed over with instructions and trust. Once delivered, the designs circulated among friends and relatives, generating interest and new requests."

Before the upsurge of digital platforms and formal export systems, designers relied on friends, relatives, or acquaintances traveling abroad to transport garments in their luggage often delivering them directly to clients or wearing them as mobile advertisements. Today, entrepreneurs increasingly draw on local networks, combining trust-based relationships with digital tools to expand their reach more efficiently and widely.

> "Today, of course, entrepreneurs can still depend on these personal networks, but social media and phones now allow us to reach far beyond our immediate circles connecting with customers across cities, regions, and even countries, all from the comfort of our workshop or home".

This narrative illustrates how Ghanaian designers creatively use networks to build and promote their brands. They rely on close and extended contacts including artisans, traders, and traveling friends or relatives using portmanteaux to ensure reliable distribution. With digital platforms, these trusted networks now reach customers locally and internationally from their workshops. These practices demonstrate how local production networks function as strategic infrastructure, enabling innovation, livelihood sustainability, and brand expansion in constrained markets.

Gatekeeping

This section examines the role of local and informal gatekeepers in Ghana's fashion industry. In a largely informal environment, independent entrepreneurs navigate low-capital production and supply chains, with gatekeepers mediating access to resources and opportunities. A female designer in Kumasi shared:

> "The Hajias, are the major wholesalers in Accra and Kumasi, often control demand and supply. They may withhold high-demand fabrics until

slower-moving stock is cleared, which can delay designers' work and force changes."

In busy hubs like Kejetia and Makola, fabric suppliers are central nodes in local production networks. Large wholesalers may withhold prints when demand is low, prompting designers to find creative ways to obtain them. These practices show how local networks help overcome resource constraints and sustain production in Ghana's fashion industry. The Kumasi designer added:

> "New styles often emerge from scarcity. When desired fabrics aren't available, designers improvise mixing materials, adjusting patterns, or experimenting."

Faced with limited options and supplier gatekeeping, designers experiment with substitute or combined fabrics, reworking designs as needed. Suppliers thus shape not only supply, but also which styles emerge, influencing production rhythms and local fashion trends. Designers' adaptations show how networks are leveraged to access resources and drive innovation. In Tamale, a master fashion entrepreneur described senior apprentices acting as gatekeepers:

> "Most of my learning came from my senior apprentice. Assigned to an experienced mentor from day one, I learned not only cutting, sewing, and finishing but also the unwritten rules of managing clients, seniors, and time, and running a business all through hands-on, practical lessons."

Narratives showed that senior apprentices act as gatekeepers, controlling which skills, techniques, and insider knowledge are passed down. Access is granted only to those who are obedient and diligent. A male fashion designer explained:

> "Seniors determine which apprentices get important tasks or exposure to clients, influencing who can earn, build reputation, and grow within the network."

Gatekeepers in fashion traditionally include master tailors, senior apprentices, suppliers, and association heads. This study shows that less visible actors—like head porters and shop attendants also act as gatekeepers, using their connections and local knowledge to influence production, supply, and market access. A female fashion entrepreneur based in Kumasi described how a *kayayei* played a pivotal role in the early days of her business. She said:

> "One day, a kayayei showed me where to get fabrics at better prices. That tip helped me source materials, adjust pricing, and grow my business. She didn't just carry fabrics she connected me to the right sellers."

Store assistants function as "living GPS," possessing intimate knowledge of the market and the location of specific goods. Reliance on them requires trust, as assisting designers may risk their livelihoods, but once established, they become invaluable guides in navigating market spaces efficiently.

Conclusion

Digital communication tools, particularly mobile phones and social media, enable entrepreneurs to connect with clients, suppliers, gatekeepers, and collaborators across geographic boundaries while remaining embedded in the local networks that sustain their craft. These everyday practices reveal that designers are trained to manage multiple stages of production, drawing on peers when needed to exchange ideas or resolve design challenges. Fabric suppliers and market traders act as key intermediaries, controlling access to materials that shape what designers can produce and when, often requiring creative adaptation and strategic decision-making. Reliance on these networks also conditions how designers scale, requiring ongoing negotiation between creative autonomy, market reach, and the limits of informal production.

These findings support arguments that local networks shape production outcomes and entrepreneurial capacity, while also generating innovations that circulate beyond domestic markets (Brydges, 2018; Simmie et al., 1999). Although fashion entrepreneurs in Ghana often present themselves as independent workers, the findings show that production, supply, marketing,

distribution, and gatekeeping are deeply relational processes. Designers rely on networks that include master tailors, apprentices, and market intermediaries, which facilitate access to materials, clients, and knowledge within an informal and precarious industry.

Consistent with Nyarko's (2022) analysis of Ghanaian craft and identity, fashion entrepreneurship in Ghana emerges as a culturally embedded practice sustained through trust, shared knowledge, and everyday collaboration. "Made in Ghana" thus signals not only national identity and creativity but also collective strategies of survival and growth. Rather than framing informality as marginalization, the study reveals plural and contested African futures grounded in relationality, care, and creative agency. Embeddedness operates through trust and digital mediation as much as spatial proximity, shaping how designers remain locally grounded while operating across wider spatial scales. At the same time, these networks expose uneven conditions of growth, showing how innovation and expansion are continually negotiated within informal production systems. Situated at the intersections of trade, informality, and cultural production, the study challenges linear accounts of local production networks by showing how designers actively construct culturally embedded futures through everyday practices.

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Humor, Style, and Belonging In Nairobi Matatu Culture: Ngangas As Moving Labels Of Urban Futures

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Movement in Nairobi is never neutral. Boarding a *matatu*—known in Sheng as a 'nganya'—means entering a dense audiovisual environment where sound, images, and slogans coalesce into a cultural encounter. Nganyas are at once transport and cultural media: vehicles through which multiple forms of urban expression are experimented with and articulated. As one young commuter from Kibera put it, "Ukipanda nganya unaingia kwa mood, si safari tu (when you board a nganya, you enter a mood; it's not just a journey)." (I have translated all Sheng and Kiswahili expressions into English. Translations try to avoid strict literal equivalency in favor of preserving humor, irony, and affect whenever possible.)

This paper argues that nganya graffiti functions as a movable archive of urban sentiment, staging fleeting bonds among strangers in motion through humor, irony, and visual overstatement. By prioritizing graffiti as a site of meaning-making, I show how movement itself becomes a cultural condition: identity, critique, and community are produced not in stable locations but on the move. Short slogans— 'Hakuna Matata, Kuna Matatu,' 'Hustle Lazima,' 'System ni Mbaya,' 'Survive Nairobi'—condense precarity, exhaustion, and resilience into jokes that circulate efficiently across the city. Methodologically, the analysis draws on informal ethnographic observations and conversations with commuters, conductors, drivers, and artists across multiple Nairobi routes between January-November 2025.

Matatus, Popular Culture, and the Urban Imaginary

The term 'matatu' is said to derive from a Kikuyu expression for 'three coins,' a fare that characterized early informal taxis during late colonial rule. As a people-built, bottom-up transport system improvise. around colonial planning, matatus emerged to fill gaps left by rigid official services and quickly became integral to urban mobility (Mutongi 2006). The state has long treated matatus as unruly—oscillating between repression and reluctant tolerance—producing a durable regime of bargaining and everyday negotiation. Formal licensing in 1973 acknowledged their indispensability but also entrenched a politics of compromise among operators, police, and regulators—an instance of 'negotiated governance' (Klopp and Mitullah 2015).

From the 1980s onward, minibuses capable of carrying more passengers replaced earlier sedans. As route competition intensified in the late 1990s and early 2000s, operators differentiated through aesthetics: bright paint, hand-lettered slogans, interior lighting, and powerful sound systems transformed the vehicles into mobile spectacles. By the 2000s, the highly customized 'nganya' emerged, drawing on global hip-hop, graffiti, Jamaican sound-system culture, and digital media; transport became entertainment and a platform for youth creativity—including work for painters, DJs, electricians, and designers (Mutongi 2017; Klaufus and Van Assche 2012).

Matatus saturate Kenyan popular culture—memes, social media, comedy skits, and music videos—and are often cited by musicians as symbols of aspiration and struggle. Popular culture in Kenya frequently employs satire for commentary (Nyairo 2006), and matatu graffiti, illustrations, and slogans regularly address political issues and sentiments (Nyairo and Ogude 2005). Descriptions such as 'clubbing on the wheels' capture the nightclub-like soundscapes inside some nganyas (Meintjes 2003). These spaces blur boundaries among private, public, and work domains and, in doing so, archive urban histories: fashions track global trends, music

shifts with generations, and slogans change with regimes (Heinze 2018; Mbembé and Nuttall 2004).

Mobility is not merely movement through space; it structures meanings, powers, and urban lives (Cresswell 2010). In Nairobi, nganyas convert ordinary journeys into mobile cultural spaces where humor, sound, and images travel with bodies. Affect theory helps to illuminate how slogans and aesthetics generate momentary belonging through shared recognition, humor, and emotion among strangers whose common ground is precarity (Ahmed 2004). Building on work that centers informality, improvisation, and negotiation in African urbanism (Simone 2004; Mbembé and Nuttall 2004), I approach Nairobi as a city continuously made through such practices. In this context, the nganya exemplifies how popular commentary, naming, and speculative imagining constitute a 'culture of nganya'—a vernacular mode of urban theory from the street.

Nganya Graffiti: Witty Slogans, Visual Humor, and Belonging in Motion

A nganya's exterior is its manifesto. Hand-painted murals, vinyl wraps, airbrushed portraits, and bold typography turn the vehicle into a moving billboard of attitude. Slogans like 'Hakuna Matata, Kuna Matatu,' 'Hustle Lazima,' 'System ni Mbaya,' 'Survive Nairobi,' or cheeky lines such as 'I love hot moms' compress everyday anxieties into punchlines legible to commuters navigating unemployment, rising costs, and political uncertainty. During the Gen Z protests of 2024, many messages became overtly political. 'Ruto Must Go (lakini fare ni 100)' blended protest with banter; receipt-styled layouts, oversized cartoon heads, and activist hashtags echoed political cartooning traditions. As one Roysambu-route driver, Bigi, explained: "Hata kama hatuwezi sema kila kitu kwa loudspeaker, kwa body ya gari tunaongea (even if we can't say everything on the loudspeaker, we speak through the body of the vehicle)". Irony spreads critique to wider publics by softening its bite; a smiling commuter is also a thinking commuter.

Cartoonists like Maddo distill politics into familiar tropes—the corrupt politician, the hustling sufferer, the rebellious youth—making politics less frightening and more discussable. In this practice, messages are mobile; unlike static billboards or newspapers, nganya cartoons and slogans circulate city-wide as the vehicles move.

Every painted slogan emerges from choices by conductors, drivers, owners, and painters. Crews recognize that graffiti is a public statement shaping how a nganya is perceived. As one driver put it, "Gari ikikaa tu plain, watu hawakumbuki. Lakini ukiweka message, inabaki kwa akili (if the car is plain, people don't remember it; when you add a message, it sticks)". Artists often describe their role as interpreting collective feeling. Jokes are tested, owners suggest, painters refine; what matters is whether the message 'hits'—passengers nod, chuckle, or repeat it out loud. In this sense, graffiti is dialogic: its audience's recognition is essential to its success.

Making Meaning in Motion: The Passenger Experience

Passengers actively interpret as well. As a university student who commutes from Ruiru noted, some slogans feel more authentic than official signage because they speak from within the city rather than about it. That perceived authenticity allows humor to carry credibility—even when the topic is serious. Riding a nganya means entering a shared interpretive space—brief, affective, and public. Before boarding, graffiti sets an emotional frame that prepares riders for humor, excess, or critique. Inside, visual messages persist and are amplified by staff performance, passenger interaction, and music. Belonging here is temporary and unofficial: it does not require consensus or a stable identity but emerges through shared affect—recognizing a joke, giggling at a catchphrase, or feeling one's frustrations named in public (Ahmed 2004).

Even when slogans speak of hardship, passengers often report feeling momentarily lighter after encountering a clever phrase. Humor does not deny difficulty; it refuses hopelessness. The same slogan is frequently interpreted differently by various passengers. One rider may understand a statement like "Hakuna Matata" as lighthearted

encouragement, while another may see it as a sign of fortitude in the face of growing expenses. Similar to this, some passengers may see hustle culture-related phrases like "No Pain No Gain" or "The Grind Never Stops" as inspirational, while others may see them cynically as a reflection of the demands and uncertainties of city life. As a result, meaning is still ambiguous and influenced by the journey's social setting as well as individual experiences. Some travelers explained how some slogans "speak for us" or "say what everyone is thinking but no one says aloud." Graffiti serves as a kind of everyday public commentary in this way, offering moments of awareness where personal annoyances are made public. Instead of providing answers, it gives travelers the chance to examine how the urban environment reflects their own experiences, turning personal emotions into a temporary but shared sense of comprehension and connection.

Nganya graffiti's offensiveness, ostentation, or vulgarity is frequently judged against norms of respectability, order, and civility that privilege moderation and quiet. Yet offense can guarantee endurance. By rejecting solemnity as the only legitimate register of suffering, slogans challenge expectations that dignity requires silence. Rather than organized protest, this is a form of everyday refusal: an insistence on play, wit, and visibility; the car drives on, the jest fades, the message lingers.

One evening after a difficult day, I boarded a nganya idling off the stage, lights flickering, music temporarily muted. 'Survive Nairobi' stretched across the rear. It was neither new nor brilliant, yet it made me pause. As the city unspooled through the windows—walkers, vendors, signals—the slogan stayed with me. It named what everyone already knew. In that honesty lay consolation. Among strangers also surviving, a private burden became a collective acknowledgment: for a moment, the city felt more readable—even if no less hard.

Why Nganya Graffiti Matters

Nganya graffiti demonstrates how urban belonging is made. With witty phrases and visual humor, matatus transform ordinary mobility into a cultural encounter where meaning circulates alongside bodies. These inscriptions offer recognition rather than solutions or utopias—a potent gesture in a city marked by precarity, congestion, and inequality (Heinze 2018; Cresswell 2010). Comedy operates as an urban technology: it spreads critique without formal opposition by translating difficulty into shareable, mobile jokes. Nganyas do not imagine a perfectly ordered city; they imagine a livable one where, for the duration of a ride, hardness can be named, teased, and shared.

As nganya graffiti shows, Nairobi's urban belonging is generated in movement, affect, and mutual recognition rather than fixed identity or long-term community. Painted slogans and visual gags convert everyday travel into encounters that translate adversity into amusement and critique without grand claims. Humor sustains survival: it confronts hard realities without surrendering to despair. In the process, nganyas act as moving archives of urban feeling, documenting how Nairobians interpret the city—what angers, sustains, and animates them—as meaning is fashioned en route, on painted metal, amid sound, traffic, and motion.

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Mobile Cinematic Screenings in Ghana: Cultural Revivalism of Local Knowledge Production in Urban Spaces

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During the colonial and post-independence eras, cinema vans circulated across Ghana—reaching even remote areas—to screen short films to the public. These films narrated local stories about governance, health, and economic life, often anchored in cultural hubs and residential spaces. Despite a contemporary revival of pop-up exhibition (from rooftop cinemas in Johannesburg to informal screenings in Kibera), Africa remains underserved in cinema exhibition; a 2023 Africa Cinema Summit report indicates roughly 1,700 screens for 1.3 billion people—about one screen per 790,000 residents.

Motivated by this disparity, this paper examines how mobile cinema reshaped urban spaces in Ghana from a historical perspective, mapping the relations among screening practices, sites, and communities. Methodologically, this research brings an interdisciplinary study of urban history and cinema studies. It utilizes existing sources on the history of pop-up cinemas, such as interviews, e.g., with former Ghanaian cinema van commentator James Amuah, emblematic films such as *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952) and *Journey by a London Bus* (1950), and digital archives (the Colonial Film Database). The analysis also reviews municipal planning archives to recover the spatial representation of cinemas. The goal is an analytical framework for the spatial characteristics of mobile screenings during the transition from colonial to post-independence Ghana, in order to reassess the relevance of these formats today.

In Ghana, and across Africa, colonial rule and anti-colonial resistance unfolded in tandem with new media forms. Movements such as Négritude in the 1930s and the Fifth Pan-African Congress in 1945 catalyzed claims to self-governance. The First World War also sharpened political consciousness across colonized societies (Adi and Sherwood 2003). In the Gold Coast, constitutional reforms during the Second World War responded to demands for participation in government (Shivji 2003). Concurrently, colonial administrations sought persuasive tools to render policy palatable. Film—circulated by mobile vans—became a preferred medium (Rice 2021). During the same period, Britain feared German propaganda and intensified its messaging across Africa (Holbrook 1985) During the Second World War the British and Germans pursued competing propaganda campaigns in Africa (Holbrook 1985).

Ghanaian audiences first encountered cinema widely via mobile vans—screens mounted on vehicles with 16-mm projectors—before theatrical exhibition was accessible to the broader public (Miescher 2005; Ukadike 1994). By 1948 the Information Services Department had established the Gold Coast Film Unit, popularizing free public screenings of documentaries, newsreels, and informational films. Given that a large share of the population resided outside urban centers, these vans carried films that asserted the superiority of Western knowledge and framed traditional practices as backward or unhealthy (Meyer 1998).[1] In this way, colonial cinema sustained the figure of the 'white man' over an 'inferior other' (Ukadike 1994), echoing the nexus of knowledge and power articulated in British imperial discourse (Said 1995).[2]

Rural–Urban Framing and Third Space

To analyze where and how mobile cinema circulated, I adopt Akin L. Mabogunje's systems approach to the rural–urban diptych. Rural–urban migration involves transformations of skills, attitudes, and commitments as people reorient from

smaller communities toward urban life (Mabogunje 1970). Earlier, Mabogunje (1968) showed how colonization integrated certain territories into global circuits, making some pre-European 'rural' regions function as commercial hubs.

Within this framework, mobile cinema proliferated in rural regions and liminal sites—what Bhabha (2004) terms 'third spaces,' where cultural contact generates new identities that unsettle binaries such as rural/urban or traditional/modern. Filmmakers and critics across Africa challenged the colonial gaze; Ousmane Sembène, for instance, criticized Jean Rouch's ethnographic cinema for dehumanizing Africans (Pearson 1973). As British films saturated colonial spaces, their sociocultural effects were legible in everyday mimicry: 'Every street had its Django and Palooka,' noted one critic, as young men imagined themselves future John Waynes (Osundare 1980).

Mobile cinema thus reconfigured both urban space and spectatorship. As Ravazzoli (2018, 18) observes, exhibition sites 'describe places' and contextualize film as practice; similarly, research on non-urban cinema-going highlights how rural exhibition remains understudied due to resource constraints and deficit framings (Gennari, Hipkins, and O'Rawe 2018; Bowles 2008). I use 'colonial spectatorship' to name the entwined production of space and gaze in the Gold Coast, combining film examples with second-hand interviews to track how knowledge about space and spectatorship was made.

Colonial Spectatorship: Space, Gaze, and Media Infrastructures

A nation's media landscape cannot be understood apart from its historical context (Milton and Fourie 2015; Mensah and Da-Costa 2022). Alongside cinema's spread in the 1930s, radio broadcasting emerged—first in Accra and then in Kumasi, Sekondi, Koforidua, and Cape Coast—under a broader British propaganda program to 'modernize' the colonies (Larkin 2008; Abubakar 2025).[3] Visual media were privileged within colonial pedagogy because vision was taken as the dominant sense (Hutmacher 2019; Kandel et al. 2000); more recently, scholars describe such regimes as 'visual biopolitics' (Tobing 2022; Deprez 2023).

Fanon (1961) described the implantation of Western values under colonialism; Gerow (2022) reframes this as 'internalization'—the colonized subject's uptake of imposed norms. Colonial urbanism segregated populations while rendering the colony 'familiar' through European spatial logics (Vidler 1994; Hoang 2025). In the Gold Coast, the redistribution of southern territories—especially Accra—displaced Ga communities as the city expanded into the colony's busiest port (Grant and Yankson 2003).[4]

Worried by the dominance of American films in commercial circuits by the 1920s (Smyth 1979), Britain promoted 'instructional cinema,' combining didacticism with entertainment to reach largely illiterate audiences (Shaka 1999).[5] Experiments by colonial observers probed rural viewers' comprehension of cinematic codes; as screenings advanced into non-urban regions, they displaced traditional entertainment (UN 1957, cited in Shaka 1999). In parallel with territorial cartographies, cinema familiarized colonial subjects with imperial norms, legitimating state power.

Filmic Pedagogy and Examples

The Colonial Film Unit favored reductive techniques—limited close-ups, minimal cross-cutting, and slow pacing—to maximize legibility for presumed 'primitive' audiences (Documentary Newsletter 1941; see also Sellers, 'Films for Primitive Peoples').[6] The short documentary *Journey by a London Bus* (1950) follows two African students in London and, via British narration, models civility, order, and cleanliness while presenting the protagonists as impressed and assimilating. The film aligns with Prime Minister Clement Attlee's call to project an 'adequate picture' of British institutions overseas (National Archives 2006).[7]

Similarly, *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952) dramatizes a move from a coastal village to modern Accra. Contemporary accounts reported robust

attendance—some 40,000 viewers in three weeks (Swanzy 1952)—and international press framed the film as authentic yet alluring.[8] Its British commentary, however, speaks over Ghanaian characters and casts urban modernity as inevitable progress, contrasting 'superstitious' village life with jazz-scored city scenes (Sandon 2013).

In both films, colonial space plays an important role in the establishment of a certain image and culture. Though it is not clear where *Journey by a London Bus* is shot, the opening scenes display contrasting aesthetics of urban life, between London's fast-paced and advanced movement inhabited by the 'civilized' Londoners, and the rural area where we see two African students waiting for the bus. This 'rural' imagery, and its association with African subjects, functioned as a critical trajectory through which Britain promoted the city as a pathway to advancement and opportunity, while casting the village as a space of presumed backwardness. *The Boy Kumasenu*'s fundamental theme of the transition from old to new, from the superstitious aesthetics of the fishing village to the low-key lighting and sleazy jazz background music in the city, suggests Britain's continuous efforts to undermine traditional lifestyles at the expense of those of the elite to enhance health and social dynamics within the Ghanaian population. Further reviews pointed out the film's position towards British colonialism when Kumasenu escapes the village to the city, highlighting it, from one hand, the independence of the Gold Coast from British rule, and on the other hand, the dangers of independence and the emergence of a modern Ghanaian urban identity.

Commentators and the Mobile Event

Outside theaters, vans brought films directly to villages and towns. The screenings hinged on a commentator who set up equipment, introduced the film, and frequently spoke over—or replaced—the British voiceover. Audience responses show how commentary transformed the screening (Rice 2016). Former van commentator James Amuah describes tailoring live explanations in local languages to ensure comprehension and to convey policy messages.[9] Colonial officials recognized that audiences trusted African commentators and that their jokes 'went down better' (UNESCO 1949).[10]

This article examined mobile cinema in colonial Ghana as a spatial and cultural practice that operated at the intersection of urban space and spectatorship. Mobile screenings functioned as provisional urban infrastructures – temporarily transforming villages and open spaces into cinematic arenas that would develop social dynamics. These mobile cinemas, fundamentally, reshaped the production process of space and local knowledge. They instructed African audiences how to inhabit villages, classrooms, and workplaces, all serving British propaganda. They actively participated in the construction of spatial realities, whether through orderly routes of London's bus system, the literacy classroom during an English lesson, or the urban migration narrative. Hence, cinematic space became a means of articulating relationships between mobility, citizenship, development, and power. Revisiting the historical residues of such cultural activities offers critical insights for contemporary debates on decolonization of space and gaze, and the reactivation of cinema as a tool for locally grounded urban and cultural engagement in Africa today.

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Endnotes

1 For historical demographic baselines, see Twum-Baah (1995) on Ghana’s urbanization profiles; this paper references the share of rural populations to contextualize van audiences.
2 On Balfour’s Egypt speech and the knowledge–power nexus in imperial ideology, see Said (1995).
3 For pre-war British propaganda frameworks and broadcast strategy, see Philip M. Taylor, ‘Techniques of Persuasion’ (1981), cited in discussions of colonial broadcasting.
4 On colonial surveying and the production of ‘lived spaces’ in imperial urbanism, see Vidler (1994) and Hoang (2025); for Accra’s spatial reconfiguration, see Grant and Yankson (2003).
5 The United Nations’ 1957 report on world illiteracy is frequently cited to frame Africa’s 1920s literacy rates; Shaka (1999) discusses its relevance to instructional cinema.
6 See ‘Films for Primitive Peoples,’ Documentary Newsletter, January 1941, 173; attributed to Unit Producer William Sellers, M.B.E.
7 Clement Attlee’s remarks on projecting British institutions overseas are referenced in National Archives materials linked to Journey by a London Bus (2006).
8 On *The Boy Kumasenu*’s reception alongside *African Jim* (1949), see Stephen Watts, ‘On the African Movie Menus,’ New York Times, April 26, 1953.
9 Interview with former van commentator James Amuah (Jennifer Blaylock, December 2010), available via Cinema in Transit (blog archive).
10 UNESCO (1949), The Use of Mobile Cinema and Radio Vans in Fundamental Education, notes audience trust in local commentators and the efficacy of humor.

Edible Heritage: Food as a Site of Cultural Meaning and Popular Expression among the Tsonga People in Zimbabwe

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This paper examines how food acts as a crucial site of cultural meaning-making, identity construction, and popular expression among the Tsonga people in Zimbabwe. Moving beyond the idea of food as merely nutrition, the research highlights Tsonga culinary traditions such as the preparation and communal sharing of *xigugu, tihove,* and *xiendlahivomu*as embodied practices that preserve indigenous knowledge and sustain social ties. Grounded in interdisciplinary approaches combining anthropology, cultural studies, and foodways research, this study explores how everyday food practices signify resistance, cultural pride, and belonging among Tsonga communities. The paper also addresses contemporary shifts where Tsonga food intersects with popular culture through urban markets, festivals, and digital platforms, fostering new possibilities for cultural entrepreneurship and youth engagement. Key focus areas include the gendered dynamics around food preparation and consumption, the sensory and performative dimensions of meals as storytelling and identity-making acts, and the role of food in negotiating Tsonga presence within Zimbabwe's multicultural landscape and diasporic flows. By placing Tsonga foodways at the centre of popular culture and African futures, the paper contributes valuable insights into how indigenous cultural heritage can be revitalized and reimagined to sustain community resilience and creative expression. It ultimately argues for the recognition of food as a powerful medium for cultural continuity and transformation in a rapidly changing African context.

Food universally transcends its biological function to become a profound maker of identity. It also acts as a repository of memory and a dynamic medium for cultural expression, and serves as a universal image of identity, memory, and social unity (Mintz, 1985; Counihan and Van Esterik, 2018). To the Tsonga people of Zimbabwe, predominantly situated in the southeastern part of the Lowveld regions of Chiredzi, Mwenezi, and Chipinge, cultural cuisine is a practice that codes culture, reinforces social stratifications, and acts as a resistance to exclusion (Miller, 2014). The preparation and sharing of dishes like *xigugu* (a pounded peanut and maize mixture rich in protein)*, tihove*, (a slow- cooked samp, grain dish) and *xiendlahivomu (*a dish made with fresh mealie, ground peanuts, and salt) can be used as cultural technologies, a place of memory, belonging, and agency in the wider socio-political context of Zimbabwe and the trans-national Tsonga community. These are not only to nourish the body but also to significantly nurture indigenous epistemology, strengthening social bonds and expressing a resilient communal pride among Vatsonga people in Zimbabwe.

This analysis draws on anthropological and cultural studies, which position Tsonga food practices as central to processes of resisting marginalisation, thus fostering a sense of place and belonging, and creatively reimagining heritage within the evolving sociocultural landscape of contemporary Africa and beyond. Based on theoretical paradigms of cultural resilience and embodied knowledge (Bourdieu, 1977; Geertz, 1973), the paper examines the role of food practices in sustaining indigenous epistemologies and changing their direction to adjust to current forces, such as urbanisation, digital media, and diaspora forces. Gendered labour and power relations in the foodways are also analysed on the basis of the role of women as bearers of culinary knowledge and as a location of cultural power (Parrenas, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 1993). These culinary practices are not passive traditions but active processes through which collective histories are narrated, cultural meanings

are negotiated, and social worlds are continuously reconstituted. In the era of homogenising forces, Tsonga foodways emerge as a powerful form of popular expression, a site of memory, and additionally a proactive strategy for ensuring cultural vitality.

Global food studies emphasize hybridity and commodity flows (Appadurai, 1988), yet African indigenous foodways, particularly Tsonga practices, remain underexplored. Amid Zimbabwe's linguistic marginalisation, where Shangani (Xitsonga) speakers number approximately 200,000 and face endangerment (UNESCO, 2024), culinary traditions offer untapped insights into resilience. Decolonial perspectives, such as wa Thiong'o's (1986) on oral epistemologies, underscore food's role in subverting colonial erasures, bridging gaps in heritage tourism scholarship aligned with Zimbabwe's National Cultural Policy (2023).

This study employs an interdisciplinary lens rooted in cultural resilience theory, which posits cultural practices' adaptability to external pressures (Walsh, 2010). Embodied cultural knowledge frames foodways as lived, sensual practices encoding values and histories (Ingold, 2000; Kuper, 2003). Bourdieu's (1977) habitus contextualises culinary dispositions as internalized structures shaping gendered power. Practice theory illuminates rituals, sensory experiences, and narratives as dynamic social forms (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012). Together, these paradigms reveal Tsonga food as decolonial agency (wa Thiong'o, 1986).

Methodology

This study uses a triangulated ethnographic methodology, which involves the use of oral history of 35 community elders, cooks, and cultural practitioners (ages 45-87, 60% female, 40% male) in Chiredzi, Chipinge, and urban centers (Harare, Bulawayo) in documenting intergenerational knowledge transfer. The interviews were done in Xitsonga and translated by the researcher, which made it linguistically and culturally accurate. Food-related rituals, festivals, and everyday activities will be observed over 18 months (January 2023 - June 2024) with a focus on sensory and performative aspects. Some of the activities that were observed were the preparation of traditional dishes, ceremonial feasts, and shared cooking. Online ethnography of social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp), where 200+ posts, videos and conversations were reviewed to study the current manifestations of the Tsonga culinary culture and innovations in the youth and diaspora circles. The National Archives of Zimbabwe provided archival evidence through the colonial agricultural reports, missionary ethnographies, and anthropological documentation to situate the past food practices and policy effects. The Midlands State University Research Ethics Committee provided the ethical approval. All the participants provided informed consent, with consideration given to cultural procedures and sensitivity towards the communities. Data analysis was thematic and inductive-based, and NVivo software was used to code and categorise them based on the themes of cultural identity, gender, resistance, and policy. The discussion combined perspectives of cultural anthropology, food studies, and gender theory in an attempt to bring a multi-dimensional perspective.

Presented below are collages depicting each dish alongside its key ingredients:xigugu, xiendlahivomu, and tihove.



Fig 1 :Xigugu
Ingredients to make xigugu



Fig 2: Xiendlahivomu
Ingredients to make xiendlahivomu



Fig 3: Tihove
Ingredients to make tihove



Fig 4: Xigu, Tihove,Xiendlahivomu
Picture showing tihove, xigugu and xiendlahivomu

Results

Interviews revealed consistent themes. Elders described pounding as mnemonic: "The rhythm recalls migrations" (Elder Masenyanyi, Chiredzi, 2024). 24/35 (69%) linked *tihove* to rituals, with women (21/35) dominating seed-saving narratives. Social media: #TsongaFood yielded 5,200 posts (2023-2025), featuring fusions like *xiendlahivomu* tacos. Festivals (Machangana 2025: 10,000 attendees) showcased 50 vendors earning ZWL 500,000 collectively (ZimStat, 2025 est.). Diaspora posts (n=80) highlighted ingredient sourcing from SA/Mozambique. 15 interviewees reported crop shifts due to droughts, adapting heirloom seeds. The results were grouped thematically as follows:

Incorporated Traditions and Practice: A Cultural and Embodied Knowledge System

The culinary practices of Tsonga are examples of embodied, tacit, sensorial, and performative knowledge transmitted across generations (Ingold, 2000). An example is the process of making the *xigugu*, where heirloom seeds are carefully chosen, roasted, pounded, and seasoned, all of which are highly laden with sensory impressions (sound, smell, touch). These are social behaviours, practiced in intergenerational areas which promote conversations, narratives, and cultural passing along. On the same note, meals such as *tihove* and *xiendlahivomu* are not only about eating but also about the actions and aesthetics that represent unity, patience, and social cohesion. The gradual preparation of *tihove* is a process of communal work and patience, whereas *xiendlahivomu*, along with fermented sorghum beer, also carries ritual significance as a sacrifice to their ancestors and as a lubricant for social interaction (Klein, 2014). The dimension of sensory is smell, sound, and touch, while signifiers of cultural memory are contained in oral stories, proverbs, and songs *(tinsimu)* which integrate the know-how of the environment, of the seasons, and of the past migrations, therefore serving as the living archive of Tsonga heritage (Miller, 2014). As an illustration, the scent of roasted groundnuts indicates the change of the season to a harvest, and the pounding of grain in wooden mortars reminds the communal memory

of communal work and camaraderie. These sensory indicators are mnemonic tools that provoke intergenerational recollection and transmission of culture (Sutton, 2001).

Cultural Policies and Indigenous Food Practices

The preservation and promotion of Tsonga culinary heritage are influenced by national and regional policies aimed at safeguarding indigenous knowledge and promoting cultural diversity. The National Museums and Monuments Act [Chapter 25:11] provides a legal framework for protecting indigenous practices, including foodways, from commercial exploitation or erosion. Policies promoting agro-biodiversity and seed sovereignty. The Promotion of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Policy in Zimbabwe, stemming from the 2013 Constitution and supported by various frameworks, focuses on documenting, preserving, and integrating traditional knowledge into national development, supporting the conservation of traditional seed varieties and farming practices vital to Tsonga foodways. These policies reinforce indigenous ecological knowledge and contribute to food security amid climate change. Cultural festivals like the Machangana Cultural Festival and Budula Festival are state-supported platforms that celebrate and showcase traditional foods, elevating them as symbols of cultural pride and resilience. These festivals serve as sites for intergenerational exchange, skill development, and cultural affirmation. However, policy challenges remain in ensuring that traditional practices are not commodified or marginalised within broader development agendas. There is a need for policies that explicitly recognise indigenous culinary knowledge as a form of intellectual property and cultural patrimony.

Gendered Knowledge and Labour in Food Practices

The gendered division of labour in the Tsonga foodways highlights larger social ranks and power dynamics. Women are also identified as keepers of food knowledge, seed choice, food processing, and cooking, as well as serving, making them epistemic agents of cultural reproduction (Parrenas, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 1993). This matrilineal custodianship accords social status and power, enhancing the role of women in the domestic sphere and making these spaces the locations of cultural reproduction and resistance. The process of food making is a phenomenal representation of maternal epistemology, which determines the identity of communities and intergenerational knowledge transfer. On the other hand, the ritual activities such as meat slaughtering, beer brewing, and control of ceremony acts of distribution denoting social hierarchy, ritual control, and social connection are taken up by men (Nwajiaku, 2001). Such gendered roles are a valid expression of social order and are also flexible in communal celebrations as an example of the practice theory of fluid social performance.

Food as Pop Culture and Cultural Rebellion

The urban centres of modern Zimbabwe have witnessed the Tsonga food culture shift, from its traditional characteristics to expressions of cultural pride and resistance, supported by festivals, agricultural shows, competitions, and the internet. These activities transform traditional cuisines into cultural performances, exposing young people to cultural experiences and empowering them economically (Miller, 2014). Festivals like the Machangana Cultural Festival and Budula Festival are sites of spectacularisation, where food is theatrical and cultural identification is performed. This is further enhanced by the digital world, as social media platforms democratize access to culinary knowledge, establish transnational networks, and enable culinary hybridity (Counihan and Van Esterik, 2018). This online activity represents cultural resilience, adapting traditional foodways to modern environments, fostering cultural entrepreneurship, and resisting homogenization (Walsh, 2018). It is also an example of cultural defiance, asserting Tsonga identity in a multicultural and globalised environment.

Multicultural and Diasporic Negotiations of Heritage

Tsonga diaspora communities, such as in South Africa, Mozambique, the UK, Australia, and North America, maintain cultural ties through food, which becomes a material and symbolic connector to the homeland (Miller, 2014). The sourcing of ingredients, sharing recipes, and adapting dishes reflect diasporic resilience and culinary innovation, a form of cultural negotiation that sustains identity amid transnational flows (Klein, 2014). Younger generations experiment with fusion cuisines, infusing traditional flavours into global formats, exemplifying heritage continuity through innovation. These practices challenge static notions of tradition, emphasising dynamic cultural processes (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2018).

Intergenerational Transfer of Knowledge

The transmission of culinary knowledge is primarily through guided participation, often within family and community settings. Elders pass down recipes, techniques, and cultural narratives through storytelling, demonstration, and participation in food preparation activities. However, modernisation and urban migration threaten these transfers. Formal education and economic pursuits sometimes displace traditional practices, leading to potential erosion of indigenous knowledge. Recognising this, community initiatives and policies promote cultural education, culinary schools, festivals, and digital storytelling that reinforce intergenerational exchanges and community engagement. Digital platforms also serve as repositories and dissemination channels for culinary knowledge, allowing diaspora communities to maintain cultural ties and pass on practices across borders.

Resistance and Cultural Reaffirmation

Tsonga foodways serve as acts of cultural resistance, asserting identity amid marginalisation, homogenisation, and globalisation. Festivals, social media campaigns, and culinary entrepreneurship elevate traditional dishes as symbols of pride, resilience, and sovereignty. The spectacularisation of food in festivals and media turns culinary skills into performances that celebrate Tsonga identity. These acts challenge dominant narratives that marginalise indigenous cultures and assert the agency of Tsonga communities in defining their cultural future. Furthermore, policies that recognize and protect indigenous practices empower communities to resist cultural erosion and promote sustainable, locally driven cultural and economic development.

Acculturation and Cultural Change

Urbanization, migration, and globalization have accelerated processes of acculturation, leading to transformations in Tsonga culinary practices. Traditional dishes are recontextualised in urban settings, sold in restaurants or markets, and infused with new influences, resulting in hybrid cuisines. Digital media plays a vital role in this transformation. Social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube democratize access to recipes, cooking tutorials, and cultural narratives, enabling younger generations and diasporic communities to participate in cultural renewal. Hashtags like Tsonga Food and Shangani Cuisine promote visibility and pride, fostering transnational networks that sustain culinary practices. Policy environments influence these processes by supporting cultural entrepreneurship, promoting small businesses that package traditional foods, and encouraging innovation within the framework of cultural heritage preservation. However, there are ongoing tensions between maintaining authenticity and adapting to new contexts an ongoing negotiation shaped by community agency and policy support.

Conclusion

Tsonga food ways exemplify the profound role of culinary practices as sites of cultural memory, social cohesion, and resistance. They embody embodied knowledge, reinforce gendered social orders, and serve as symbols of identity amid rapid social change. Contemporary festivals, digital platforms, and diaspora networks demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of Tsonga culinary heritage, underscoring that cultural preservation is not static but an ongoing process of recreation

and reinvention. Recognising food as a powerful medium for cultural expression underscores its importance in sustaining indigenous knowledge, fostering social cohesion, and asserting cultural agency in a globalised world.

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Gender and Digital Visibility in Lamu Old Town's Maulidi Festival

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This paper explores how women's participation in the Lamu Maulidi Festival, a religious gathering held in a historic Swahili port town located in the Lamu Archipelago, off the northern coast of Kenya, is being reconfigured through processes of digital mediation. By focusing on the annually held Maulidi festival that commemorates the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, this study situates the festival within the broadest possible social context, as a performative act within Swahili Islam. Though women have historically participated in gendered ritual spaces through domestic devotional gatherings and religious hospitality, their visibility within public religious performances has been spatially and socially structured. Digital platforms are now an integral part of the social life of the people of Lamu, especially during festivals such as the Maulidi. Contemporary digital transformations demonstrate women's religious presence becoming newly archived, debated, and projected into digital spaces, reshaping the visibility and meaning of the festival for local and global audiences. I argue that the Maulidi festival operates as living archives of Swahili heritage, where performance, both in physical and digital spaces, become acts of creativity, memory and projection. This paper utilizes performance theory and mediatization theory to interpret the intersectionality of gendered practices and social media in the Lamu Maulidi festival. In these intersections, this paper locates the ongoing reinvention of Swahili heritage and the imagining of Africa's digital futures.

Popular culture has become a critical lens through which African societies articulate identity and imagine futures. Festivals all around the world are markers of celebration and commemoration that attract both local and foreign visitors to participate. In African popular culture, festivals occupy a central position as spaces where history, religion, and culture converge. The Maulidi festival brings together the Swahili community living within the archipelago and visitors from around the globe annually to commemorate the birth of the Prophet Mohammed.

These festivals have been discussed in relation to heritage tourism and religious life (Kahuno 2017; Olali 2015). Studies on festivals and digital visibility to date have focused on tourism marketing (Sigala, Christou, and Gretzel 2012), the function of social media in promoting music festivals (Oklobdžija 2015), the nature, purpose and breadth of social media prior to during and after the festivals, the difficulty of inferring users' attendance at huge events using non-geotagged social media postings made before, during and after the event (de Lira et al. 2019), and social media factors that impacted festival tourism visitors (Pei-Ying 2020).

Fewer studies have focused on how digital visibility through social media platforms have impacted the perception of the Swahili community in terms of gendered practices. This paper argues that women have long participated within gendered ritual spaces, but the expansion of social media platforms has introduced new forms of circulation, documentation, and commentary that transforms how ritual performance is seen, archived, and debated. Gendered practices during the Maulidi festivals constitute performative acts through which Swahili identity is produced, affirmed, and reworked. These performances do not remain confined to physical festival spaces within Lamu Old Town. They are increasingly extended into digital arenas, where they acquire new meanings, audiences, and socio-economic implications. The paper views festivals as cultural performances through which gendered knowledge is transmitted and collective memory is sustained. By examining the intersectionality of gender, and digital culture, the paper contributes to broader debates on popular culture and African futures.

Historical Origins of the Lamu Maulidi Festival

Lamu Old Town is a historic Swahili port town located in the Lamu Archipelago, off the northern coast of Kenya, which was listed as a World Heritage Site in 2001. Lamu Old Town has been occupied continuously for over 700 years and its salient features are the narrow streets and use of donkeys for transportation within the town. The town is a representation of the syncretic blend of Bantus, Arabs, Persians, Indians, Chinese, and Europeans that has evolved over the centuries through trade and migration. Annual festivals like the Maulidi transforms the island into vibrant arenas of cultural expression.

The Maulidi Festival is a month-long religious Islamic event held during the third month of the Muslim calendar to celebrate the birth of Prophet Muhammad, synonymously referred to as "mawlid." This religious festival has its origins in 8th century Egypt and is celebrated around the world. However, the unique East African version is believed to have been developed in Lamu by Habib Swaleh Jamal Lely, an Arab from the Comoros Islands, when he came to Lamu in 1866 (Olali 2015). The event involves processions, poetry recitals, and feasts, which symbolize spiritual devotion and communal harmony. Globally, the characteristics of such celebrations are more or less the same: Crowds gather for one or more days, a fair of varying size and importance accompanies the religious celebrations, or Quran reading sessions take place inside and /or outside the sanctuary of the saint concerned, one or more processions are held in which the keeper of the sanctuary (often the saint's descendants) and (frequently) sufi orders participate and the cloth covering the Saint's shrine is replaced by a new one in the course of the celebration (Olali 2014, 4).

Digital platforms make these local celebrations into a global event. In 2025, digital platforms depicted people across Muslim nations celebrating Maulidi in their respective traditions and distinctive ways of celebration. In Istanbul, Turkey, Muslims showed up for prayer as they prepared for the celebration of the birth anniversary of the beloved prophet. Palestinians didn't hesitate to celebrate by going to the Old City of Jerusalem in the occupied West Bank to celebrate at the Al Aqsa mosque despite brutal Israeli occupation, while in Egypt, Muslim Sufis flooded the streets of Cairo and other major governorates to celebrate in their traditional Sufi style, which includes religious choir-like chants. In Yemen, thousands marched in the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in celebration to mark the birth anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad. Iraqis also marked the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, praying and playing music as their way of celebrating while the Syrians prepared their famous candy, Mlabas, ahead of the celebrations in the Old City of Damascus. In Somalia, people rode horses and waved flags to mark the anniversary in the capital, Mogadishu.

In coastal East Africa, the Maulidi Festival remains a normalized and celebrated devotional practice. In the Lamu archipelago, the mention of Maulidi elicits an aura of happiness since a carnival-like atmosphere prevails on Lamu Island (Olali 2015). In Lamu, apart from the anniversary marking the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, Maulidi is also about contemplation and the spiritual focus of the tomb where al-Habib Swaleh is buried. This festival attracts numerous visitors from both within the Lamu Archipelago and beyond, uniting them to witness Quranic recitals competitions, Donkey races, Dhow races, swimming races, and various other games held for entertainment.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a multimethod approach, integrating participant observation, cultural ethnography, digital ethnography, and visual documentation along with archival data, and secondary literature for historical context. For interpretation and contextualization of data, the study employed performance theory, mediatization theory, and feminist perspectives. It interprets festivals as living social acts where men and women extend their performances online through social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, Facebook and YouTube.

Performance theory is not only used to tell what performance is and how it works, but also uses the concept of performance to make use of other material (Shepherd 2016). Gendered practices in the Maulidi festival all constitute performances that are communicated in real time and shared spaces that help explain human behavior. Drawing from the work of Victor Turner, this paper examines the Maulidi as a ritual performed in sequestered places, designed to influence preternatural entities and or forces on behalf of the actor's goals and interests (Turner 2008). In his research on ritual and its function as a social drama within the Ndembu community of Zambia, Turner expanded on the work of Van Gennep, indicating that all ritual rites are marked by a threefold progression of successive ritualized stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. Separation which clearly demarcates the sacred space and time from the profane and secular, has been a point of debate among Muslims in Lamu and around the world, especially due to the intersection of pilgrimage and carnival at the Lamu Maulidi Festival (Olali 2015). This paper argues that digital platforms do not merely document Maulidi, they actively reshape visibility of women's participation, and the boundaries of sacred space.

Hjarvard (2008) explained that the media are agents of social and cultural change. Mediatization is a double-sided process of high modernity, where media emerges as an independent institution with a logic of its own, that other social institutions have to accommodate and also as an integrated part of other institutions such as politics, work, family, and religion. This paper seeks to understand how social media platforms have been accommodated in the Maulidi Festivals in the Lamu Old Town. Thus, this study does not view social media platforms as separate entities from culture, but as a part of the Swahili culture. The Maulidi is depicted as a ritual performance structured by gendered norms in ritual spaces, with digital platforms creating a secondary stage. In this context, the Maulidi is no longer confined to physical space, but extending ritual temporality to digital platforms, influencing ritual form.

Gendered Spaces in the Lamu Maulidi Festival

In the Swahili communities along the coast, Muslim religious practices are structured by spatial and social norms that organize gendered participation. In Lamu, mosques and public ritual spaces take center stage during religious festivals such as the Maulidi. This does not imply the absence of women, but rather participation that has historically been differentiated. During the festivities, each village plays its music (mostly with drums) and the men dance in a coordinated fashion. Throughout the Maulidi Festival, women have their own private ceremonies but they can also take part in most male ceremonies. Women and men sit in separate sections during the prayer recitals and women make duas (supplication) at the end of the ceremony. After Isha (the last prayer) congregants gather outside Riyadha Mosque for a Quran recitation contest. Women engage in the Maulidi through domestic devotional gatherings in their homes, transmission of devotional knowledge within family networks, hospitality, and competitions as participants during the henna painting, art exhibitions, cooking competitions and as spectators during the dhow races, donkey races, and swimming competitions.

The Swahili identity is inherently a blend of cultural exchanges along the East African coast for centuries between Bantus and traders from Arabia and the Far East, grounded on hospitality. This led to the incorporation of Arab and Indian staples, such as rice, spices and maize into the indigenous Bantu staples, leading to the emergence of the Swahili cuisine. Food in the Swahili coast serves as a marker of identity. In festivals, communal eating reinforces social bonds, acting as a symbol of prosperity and unity (Ogutu and Githinji 2025). The Maulidi Festival serves as good examples on how sharing of food in festivals preserves collective memory and heritage (Kahuno 2017; Olali 2015). Gendered food practices express themselves in the division of labour associated with food acquisition, preparation, distribution, and consumption. The Maulidi in Lamu is characterized by acts of hospitality where women are involved in cooking and selling homemade foods to raise funds to cater

for education and other needs of orphans and disadvantaged children and families in the area. One female participant noted that some of the foods prepared by women such as fish are usually caught by men very early in the morning before the festivals begin, showing how men and women shape their express their gender identities during the festivals. However, it is noted that during communal feasting, men eat together in large plates away from the women and children who eat in family homes, showing gendered spaces in the Lamu Maulidi Festival.

These forms of participation by women operate as gendered but not necessarily subordinate spaces, since agency is exercised through hospitality, piety and devotion rather than overt public leadership. Public visibility has often remained uneven, often guided by religious and cultural norms on gendered spaces. This is why men are associated with formal mosque settings and recitations made in these spaces by male reciters. On the final day of the festival, in the evening just before sunset, there is a "zeffe" procession into town. Here, boys and elderly men join hands, dance, and sing together in a joyous celebration adorned in "kanzus" (long dresses) and "kofias" (embroidered hat), while women and young children gather along the narrow streets to watch the group walks along the waterfront, singing, rejoicing and offering community support adorned in black dresses "bui bui". It is precisely this uneven visibility that digital mediation begins to transform.

Digital Platforms in Reshaping the Visibility and Meaning of Lamu Maulidi Festival

Digital platforms have introduced new dynamics into Maulidi participation, with performances once limited to local attendees now circulating globally for people to engage through viewing, commenting, and sharing. Ritual moments become archives where men are seen walking through the narrow streets of Lamu singing and reciting poems and prayers at the Riyadha Mosque. Young people now frequently act as digital intermediaries, filming and uploading content, introducing generational shifts in how the Maulidi is framed and narrated. However, several interviewees, especially the elderly men expressed their concern that tourists often photograph cultural performances without understanding the religious significance.

The expansion of digital technologies and social media has introduced new dimensions in studying festivals, enabling researchers to examine the virtual aspect of festival experiences and their broader social media impacts (MacKay et al. 2017). Early anthropologists and sociologists focused on festivals as a way to understand cultural practices, social norms, and community structures (Frost 2016). Over the years, the study of festivals has evolved to reflect broader societal shifts and changing cultural practices due to globalization (Laing 2018; Mair 2019).

To account for the transformation of ritual through social media platforms, this study employs mediatization theory to show how the Maulidi increasingly becomes shaped by media logics, as a localized event visually circulating as a narrative object. Hepp's concept of 'deep mediatization' highlights how digital infrastructures restructure social interaction itself. Ritual temporality becomes altered when performances are recorded, replayed, commented upon, and algorithmically amplified. Visibility becomes partially governed by likes, shares, comments, and trends, introducing new forms of recognition and social capital.

The digital era has revolutionized societal dynamics, enabling novel forms of expression, social interaction, and global connectivity (Gradillas and Thomas 2023). Locally, digital platforms reinforce cultural identity and the county government of Lamu uses social media to promote the festivals and boost the economy through tourism. However, there is a need to understand power dynamics within festivals in digital spaces, and how they shape the representation and accessibility of festivals between digital and physical spaces. Festivals have transcended the once physical spaces, temporal constraints, and limited interactions, embracing the limitless possibility of the digital age (Duffy and Mair 2021; Laing 2018). In the mediated environment, women's ritual labour may acquire expanded audiences at the risk of commodification

of heritage, simplification, and exposure to scrutiny. Analysis of festival promotional materials on social media revealed that images of women preparing food and wearing traditional Swahili attire were frequently used to represent the festival, whereas private devotional activities were absent from online representations.

One female participant noted that while public celebrations are frequently photographed and shared online, certain women's ceremonies remain restricted because they are considered private and sacred. While many women's ritual activities during the Maulidi, such as qasida recitations and *vugo* performances (traditional Swahili dance for women) remain restricted from public recording, other aspects of women's ritual labour have increasingly appeared on digital platforms. Images and videos shared through social media, tourism websites, and festival promotional materials frequently depict women preparing and distributing food to pilgrims, participating in public processions, and displaying Swahili dress and adornment. Such representations have expanded the visibility of women's contributions to the festival beyond Lamu itself, allowing broader audiences to engage with Swahili cultural heritage. However, these digital portrayals often foreground visually appealing and marketable aspects of women's participation while overlooking the deeper religious meanings and labour involved, thereby contributing to the simplification and commodification of heritage practices. To the women in Lamu, participating in the Lamu through cooking and in processions is rooted in religious and cultural practices.

Conclusion

The people of Lamu have incorporated social media into their social system, which plays a central role in social life, spirituality, becoming vibrant arenas of digital creativity and cultural integration. This is because culture is not static but dynamic in nature. Social media platforms in Lamu County have also been used as spaces where gender identities are negotiated and contested upon during the Maulidi festival. However, there is still a need for a focus on the authenticity of representation and the power structures surrounding the use of social media platforms during festivals. This paper argues that the Maulidi festival operates as living archives of Swahili heritage, where performance, both in physical and digital spaces, become acts of creativity, memory and projection. In these intersections, this paper locates the ongoing reinvention of Swahili heritage and the imagining of Africa's digital futures.

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Popular Culture, Everyday Citizenship, and Public Policy in Contexts of Prolonged Violence: Youth Practices in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique

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Since 2017, Cabo Delgado has experienced sustained armed violence characterised by displacement, infrastructural destruction, economic disruption, and fluctuating state presence. While some accounts frame the province through post-conflict terminology, insecurity remains intermittent and territorially uneven. Prolonged violence more accurately captures this condition of suspended normalcy in which institutional authority is experienced as unstable and unevenly distributed (Feijó 2020). Research has prioritised insurgency dynamics, regional security arrangements, and extractive political economy. These analyses illuminate structural conditions but often privilege institutional actors, leaving the everyday arenas of governance interpretation under-examined. Youth cultural practices remain marginal in scholarship despite young people constituting a demographic majority and bearing disproportionate exposure to displacement and labour precarity.

This article asks how youth popular culture functions as everyday citizenship and public policy engagement in contexts of prolonged violence. Rather than conceptualising culture as symbolic resilience or latent resistance, the study approaches cultural micro-publics as governance-adjacent arenas, advancing three arguments: prolonged violence shapes governance experience; popular culture operates as differentiated aesthetic citizenship; and cultural modalities function as informal interfaces through which public policy is evaluated. Moving beyond post-conflict frameworks, the study conceptualises prolonged violence as institutional ambiguity in which governance remains present yet unevenly experienced. Using qualitative fieldwork with twenty-two young cultural actors in Pemba and peri-urban neighbourhoods, the study argues that popular culture constitutes a field of aesthetic citizenship structured through narrative, spatial, mediated, and mnemonic modalities. These modalities function as governance-adjacent arenas where legitimacy and belonging are evaluated through lived experience rather than formal political participation.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Nordstrom (2004) shows that everyday relational practices sustain continuity where authority is fragmented. Honwana (2012) argues that African youth navigate "waithood" through informal arenas of recognition. Bayat (2010) conceptualises everyday politics as dispersed, incremental claim-making. Lipsky (1980) demonstrates that governance is experienced at the street level, where policy becomes lived rather than procedural. Appadurai (2013) frames aspiration as socially structured, constrained by material conditions. Together, these frameworks position youth popular culture as a differentiated field where relational reconstruction, governance interpretation, and aspiration converge.

The study adopts a qualitative design. Fieldwork (October–December 2025) was conducted in Pemba and peri-urban neighbourhoods hosting displaced populations. Twenty-two participants aged eighteen to thirty-five were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. All were engaged in cultural production, including music, spoken word, mural art, and digital content creation. Data were generated through interviews, participant observation, and analysis of cultural artefacts. Digital ethnography examined circulation on WhatsApp and Facebook. Thematic analysis integrated inductive coding with categories related to citizenship enactment and governance perception (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Ethical procedures followed national guidelines (Universidade Eduardo Mondlane 2018).

Youth Popular Culture and Social Reconstruction

Cultural practices play a sustained role in relational re-aggregation among displaced youth. Music rehearsals, mural production, and poetry sessions enable expression of fear, uncertainty, and displacement. These are ordinary yet meaningful practices that facilitate emotional articulation and reconnection. Such micro-level interactions support relational continuity, resonating with research on symbolic and relational reconstruction (Richards 2005; Nordstrom 2004). Mnemonic practices such as rural imagery in lyrics and murals reactivate territorial memory without idealising return. Cultural production mediates continuity within disruption, aligning with Geertz's (1973) concept of culture as a system of meaning.

Interview data highlight widespread mistrust of formal political institutions. Cultural expression becomes a primary arena of political subjectivity. Narrative modalities embed critiques of inequality through metaphor. Spatial modalities, such as murals, articulate negotiated belonging in marginalised areas, reflecting Mbembe's (2001) insights on visibility and subject formation. Digital cultural production circulates political concerns within peer networks, consistent with socially embedded forms of youth politics (Durham 2000; Honwana 2012).

Youth cultural production frequently references employment initiatives, humanitarian assistance, and security interventions. Lyrics and digital videos articulate frustrations with limited opportunities, uneven aid distribution, and policy implementation gaps, reflecting Lipsky's (1980) framework of experiential governance. Digital participation remains uneven due to unequal access to connectivity, consistent with Appadurai's (2013) argument on differentiated aspirational capacity. Cultural micro-publics operate as informal feedback sites where governance is evaluated from below.

Youth articulate aspirations for stability, dignified work, and social recognition within constrained conditions of prolonged violence. These aspirations align with Appadurai's (2013) notion of negotiated future-making. Cultural practices operate across narrative, spatial, mediated, and mnemonic modalities, rehearsing futures in the present rather than postponing them until violence ends.

Empirical Evidence of Youth Cultural Practices in Cabo Delgado

The empirical evidence collected through interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography demonstrates that youth popular culture in Cabo Delgado constitutes an important arena through which governance, citizenship, and future aspirations are negotiated under conditions of prolonged violence. The experiences shared by the twenty-two participants indicate that cultural activities extend beyond artistic expression, serving as practical mechanisms for interpreting everyday realities, strengthening social cohesion, and engaging with issues of public concern. This finding corroborates Feijó (2020), who argues that the insurgency has transformed everyday social relations and reshaped how communities interact with public institutions and local governance.

Interview participants consistently reported that music has become one of the principal means through which young people express concerns about unemployment, interrupted education, forced displacement, insecurity, and limited economic opportunities. Rather than openly criticising political authorities, artists frequently employ metaphors, symbolism, and locally meaningful narratives to communicate experiences of exclusion and aspirations for social change. These findings support Bayat's (2010) argument that everyday politics is often enacted through informal and subtle practices rather than through conventional forms of political participation. They also reinforce observations by the Instituto de Estudos Sociais e Económicos (IESE, 2020) that many Mozambican youths increasingly seek alternative spaces for participation when formal institutions fail to respond to their social and economic expectations.

Participant observation further revealed that poetry performances, music rehearsals, dance

events, and community artistic gatherings play a significant role in rebuilding relationships between internally displaced youth and host communities in Pemba. These cultural spaces encourage dialogue, trust-building, and collective reflection on shared challenges, including access to education, employment, security, and public services. Such findings are consistent with Nordstrom's (2004) argument that everyday social interactions contribute to maintaining social continuity and resilience in contexts affected by violence. They also echo Feijó's (2022) analysis that social cohesion in Cabo Delgado increasingly depends on informal community initiatives capable of reconnecting displaced populations with their new social environments.

Visual culture also emerged as an important expression of everyday citizenship. Murals observed in peri-urban neighbourhoods frequently portrayed rural landscapes, agricultural activities, schools, families, and symbols of peace. Participants explained that these artistic representations reflected memories of their communities of origin while simultaneously expressing aspirations for stability, reconstruction, and social coexistence. In this sense, visual culture functions not only as artistic production but also as a medium through which collective identities and shared meanings are reconstructed, reinforcing Geertz's (1973) understanding of culture as a system of symbolic meaning. These observations are equally compatible with Feijó's (2021) interpretation that collective memory remains fundamental to preserving social identity among conflict-affected communities in northern Mozambique.

The digital ethnography produced complementary evidence. WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages were widely used by young cultural actors to circulate songs, poetry, videos, and visual content addressing humanitarian assistance, insecurity, employment opportunities, youth entrepreneurship, and local development initiatives. Although unequal access to internet connectivity and digital devices limited participation for some respondents, these platforms nevertheless operated as informal public spheres where government interventions, humanitarian programmes, and community experiences were continuously discussed and evaluated. These findings reinforce Lipsky's (1980) argument that citizens often experience governance through everyday interactions with policies and institutions rather than through formal political processes. They also support the findings of OMR (2021), which highlight that digital communication has become an increasingly important mechanism through which young people in Cabo Delgado exchange information, mobilise social support, and discuss local governance challenges.

Across all forms of cultural expression, participants consistently associated their aspirations for the future with access to quality education, stable employment, physical security, and social recognition. These aspirations reflect Appadurai's (2013) concept of the capacity to aspire, while also demonstrating how prolonged violence constrains opportunities for personal and collective development. Similar concerns have been documented by the IESE (2020), which identifies youth unemployment, economic exclusion, and limited institutional opportunities as major constraints to sustainable development in Mozambique.

Overall, the empirical findings demonstrate that youth popular culture in Cabo Delgado constitutes far more than artistic expression or symbolic resilience. Instead, it functions as a form of everyday citizenship through which young people interpret governance, negotiate belonging, strengthen social relations, and engage with public policy from the perspective of their lived experiences. These findings reinforce the article's central argument that popular culture represents a governance-adjacent arena where legitimacy, participation, and future-making are continuously constructed and contested under conditions of prolonged violence (Bayat, 2010; Honwana, 2012; Lipsky, 1980; Appadurai, 2013; Feijó, 2020).

Conclusion

Youth popular culture in Cabo Delgado constitutes a central arena of political life under prolonged violence. Cultural practices mediate governance,

belonging, and aspiration without forming unified political movements. Aesthetic citizenship reframes political subjectivity as culturally enacted and negotiated. Cultural micro-publics function as governance-adjacent spaces where policy is interpreted, narrated, and morally evaluated. Popular culture thus reshapes symbolic and relational infrastructures through which legitimacy and future-making are negotiated.

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Thinking Beyond Borders: The Pamoja AFCON 2027 and the Politics of Regional Integration in East Africa

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Introduction

In 2022, Kenya was banned from all footballing activities by the Federation of International Football Associations (FIFA), and the Football Kenya Federation (FKF) was dissolved over alleged embezzlement. After the FIFA ban was lifted on November 28, 2022, Kenya, together with Uganda and Tanzania secured the AFCON 2027 bid from the Confederation of African Football (CAF) under the label *Pamoja* – a Swahili concept for 'togetherness.' Why did Tanzania and Uganda decide to join forces with Kenya, and what does a tri-state bid by the 'traditional' East African nations imply for the newer East African Community (EAC) members? What is society's position in the Pamoja project, and whose interests does Pamoja serve? This paper uses the Pamoja project to examine East African sports culture, showing how discourses constructing the Pamoja AFCON 2027 project (re)mobilize imaginaries of regional integration. 'East Africa' designates Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, though in some contexts it refers to the broader EAC (including Rwanda, Burundi, the DRC, Somalia, and South Sudan). Primary data collected in Kampala, Uganda (October 2025–February 2026), indicates that although Pamoja is presented 'in the name of East African peoples' as signifying a collective regional identity, it is a modern state project that masks long-standing domestic and interstate tensions.

Theoretical Considerations: *Ubuntu*

I ground the analysis in *Ubuntu*, a traditional African philosophy which semantically informs Pamoja. Ubuntu emphasizes common humanity and social interdependence: personal identity derives from community, fostering harmony, respect, and empathy (Magu 2023). In this view, leaders should act less from autonomous selfhood and more from embeddedness in community (Magu 2023, 49). Ubuntu provides a framework for Pan-Africanism and region-building rooted in African realities. As Tamale (2020) argues, Ubuntu as a decolonial theory is vital for reimagining futures, identity, and unity and for writing minorities back into history—thereby rethinking socio-political and economic justice. Ubuntu thus offers a lens to interrogate inclusion and exclusion (gender, class, age, and nationality) in nation-building and regional integration and to parse how 'pamoja' is deployed in the name of East African peoples—and where it reaches its limits. The concept 'East African peoples' is problematic, raising questions of inclusion and exclusion across geography, culture, politics, and history; I use it with awareness of these issues.

This study uses qualitative methods drawing on primary and secondary sources. Primary data comprises eleven semi-structured interviews conducted in Kampala (October 2025–February 2026): six Ugandans, two Tanzanians, and three Kenyans; four participants were women. Time and resource limits precluded travel to Kenya and Tanzania, so Tanzanians and Kenyans living in Kampala were interviewed. Participants were selected for availability and inclusivity by gender and nationality; pseudonyms are used. Secondary sources include newspaper articles and official social-media posts to trace state narratives and the construction of Pamoja in mainstream media.

Talking and Walking (Dis)integration: Pamoja and the Paradox of East African Unity.

In June 2023, the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) passed a resolution supporting the 'EA Pamoja AFCON 2027 Bid'. Debates framed Pamoja as advancing social and economic benefits

for the entire community. Gerald Siranda, Uganda's EALA representative, urged support from South Sudan, Burundi, the DRC, and Rwanda, arguing that "hosting the Africa Cup of Nations in the community has enormous social and economic benefits for the community," including the new member states (Mwanguhya 2025, 37). Such discourse emphasizes togetherness and shared development, echoing Ubuntu's ideals. Congratulatory messages by the presidents of Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya likewise stressed development and collective pride. On September 27, 2023, President Samia Suluhu directed preparations, including completing new stadia in Dodoma and Arusha; President Yoweri Museveni and President William Ruto struck similar tones. Ruto pledged to mobilize "every resource, every person, and every sector" to deliver a world-class event in 2027 (Monitor 2023).

Yet the same statements reveal a familiar dilemma: should ultimate loyalty be to the regional bloc or to sovereign nation-states? What kind of consciousness would Pamoja evoke? Interview data complicate the official optimism expressed by the presidents. The role of sports in continental and regional integration traces back to the independence era. Sports were believed to foster Pan-Africanism and continental and regional unity by independence leaders like Nkrumah and Nyerere (Darby 2019: 8; Charway and Houlihan 2020). In East Africa, various regional tournaments like the Gossage Cup (later the East and Central African Challenge Cup [CECAFA]) were organised by the colonial state since the 1920s to foster unity within the British empire (Kakooza 1995), and these were later inherited by postcolonial regimes as means through which the new independent nations expressed regional and continental solidarities. With earlier regional tournaments like CECAFA, why hasn't notable regional integration occurred? Society's skepticism in the Pamoja Project is shaped by histories of futility concerning regional integration and society's exclusion from previous integration initiatives (Magu 2023: ix). While East African states establish integration projects, citizens have no or at best little input in foundational and existential goals (ibid). Thus, society's marginal role and scepticism in the Pamoja project, especially in its preparation phase, need to be situated within histories of state dominance over society and interstate tensions that have featured the East African scene since independence.

Felix, a 37-year-old journalist in Kampala, doubted Pamoja's integrative promise, reading it as a cover for the EAC's failures and as a retreat to the 'original three' amid unresolved disputes (e.g., Uganda–DRC, DRC–Rwanda). Felix said:

> When I first heard of Pamoja, I was sceptical. I really wondered if at all…this tournament is a cover-up of the failure of the East African community project…because the whole idea of East African Community was to remove borders, to ensure that we are one… On paper, the East African Community has expanded by adding new members, so this tournament Pamoja… so where does it leave the rest? This tournament Pamoja means we have gone back to the original three, the rest are not part of this scheme... Concretely, I don't think it will mean anything in terms of real integration…. Each country is on its own. You just imagine, DRC and Rwanda can't talk. Uganda and DRC can't talk because they think we are fuelling the political crisis there by supporting rebels in Congo. So which sort of integration?

The above quote suggests that Pamoja is a state project, with society playing a marginal role in its organisation. State dominance is evident in state narratives promoting the project's interests. In April 2026, State House Uganda declared that the Pamoja bid had "evolved from a football federation initiative into a fully backed government project." The tri-state bid and hosting of the Pamoja AFCON are believed to represent "a single ambitious football bloc" (State House, 2026). CAF holds a similar view that the title of the project 'Pamoja' adequately represents the spirit behind the project since it is being organised as a regional event established on "cooperation, shared infrastructure, and cross-border movement" (CAFonline, 2026). These narratives emphasise Pamoja's ability to foster unity and togetherness in political, social, and economic dimensions, embodying the true ideals of Ubuntu. However, the growing state

interest and dominance over sports, especially the Pamoja project, also underline the marginalisation of society. Although the principles of Ubuntu are organically ingrained in society (Tamale 2020: 11), and despite the Pamoja promising a communally rooted enterprise embodying the spirit of togetherness, harmony, and the collective strength of African communities (CAFonline, 2025), it practically operates a top-down scheme where the state holds the ultimate authority in decision-making. As state narratives in Uganda view the project as 'more than a football tournament' (CAFonline, 2026), many fans are mainly interested and optimistic only in its footballing dimension.

Anthony, a 28-year-old social worker in Busoga decried the state's marginalisation of football fans and how the Pamoja project only reveals internal tribal and regional favouritisms and tensions which are practically major challenges to the larger East African unity. Anthony said the following:

> During and after the Pamoja bid, the state… was dictatorial and not engaging the public, especially sports fans while making their decisions. They were making decisions out of individual interests, for instance, on where stadiums would be developed. So, I asked why Busoga region, which is near the capital city did not get a stadium to host some AFCON games... If you critically look at it, it is their thing. It is neither in national nor regional interests. We are just waiting to watch games... We are too sidelined…that is why some people even forget about the 2027 AFCON. As a football fan, I just want to watch football and that is it. Those thinking about economic development and regional unity, football will not bring anything like that. We saw CHAN, it brought nothing.

Anthony's remarks highlight the internal fractures within the independent nation-states like Uganda. While stadiums for the Pamoja are being built, they are viewed as regional developments; thus, regions like Busoga, which the government did not consider for stadium development under the Pamoja project feel excluded. Considering such internal regionalisms, how is East African unity and community possible? How can nation-states federate at a macro (East Africa) level when they have negated federation at a micro level, as seen in Uganda, where the state has rejected Buganda's federation pleas? Locally known as '*Federo*', Buganda Kingdom has advocated for a federal system of government within Uganda, historically opposing incorporation into a unitary Uganda and East Africa without assured guaranteed autonomy. This highlights the ambition for autonomy, a matter which has also hindered unity, integration, and federation at the regional level (East Africa). The efforts for a regional integration and potential federation under which the Pamoja project is presented expose a complex contradiction where some member states pursue federation at one level and reject it at another. Summers (2014) suggests that to understand this historical conundrum requires situating regional integration in narratives of identity politics, citizenship, and sovereignty, which, while challenging narratives of colonial domination and anti-colonial nationalism, continue to torment African postcolonial imaginaries. While the Ugandan state finances projects like Pamoja aimed at fostering East African regional unity and collective development, internal intertribal tensions and the unequal distribution of the national cake are persistent challenges which evoke the question whether unity and integration are attainable at a regional level despite internal disunities and economic and political discontent.

As preparations for AFCON 2027 are taking shape with augmented funding for infrastructural development, economic struggles and the rising authoritarian political terrain in East Africa persist in influencing public perception of the project as primarily political, offering no direct benefit to the masses beyond football matches. Charlotte, a Kenyan electrician working in Kampala noted that while the Pamoja is a good footballing project, people are mainly concerned with their daily survival. Charlotte said this:

> You see in Kenya we want the tournament but we have our own financial struggles. We shall see when the tournament comes but now, people are concerned with their daily struggles.

> I don't expect much in terms of development and even unity. Tanzanians will remain in their country during the tournament. So will Ugandans and Kenyans. I don't think we shall interact outside social media. In Kenya, Ruto is always recording social media videos at the new stadiums like Talanta, to positively present himself for the forthcoming elections… I think the project is political and us, our role is only to buy tickets and watch.

The excerpt above shows the Pamoja project as an important step for regional integration, although its potential for this purpose is limited by the political and economic context in which it is being organised, especially as questions over the increasing costs of survival, the exclusion of new member states, the interstate political tensions, and institutional weakness remain unresolved. With the increasing dictatorial political climate in East Africa, Pamoja is understood by members of the public as a political mobilisation and legitimisation tool by those in the government. On this issue, Felix said:

> Leadership wants to use sports, especially football which is popular as a way of political legitimisation... As years have gone, Uganda has a young population and Museveni sees that football can divert them from questioning him... and even recently in the elections that have been a sham, he opened a stadium in Hoima, using it as a platform to campaign, to show people that we have come from far. He said we built the stadium with our own money…

Similar thoughts were expressed by Juma, a 37-year-old Tanzanian student currently living in Kampala, who said that "Samia Suluhu has become a dictator." "While she said she was constructing a stadium in Arusha for the forthcoming AFCON, she named it after herself." He added. According to Juma, this political move was partly intended to mobilise electoral support for the president for the October 2025 presidential elections. For the case of Uganda, society's scepticism and attribution of the Pamoja project to state interests is partly attributed to the increasing state control over sports in general through the Ministry of Education and Sports that is headed by Uganda's First Lady, who also chairs the local organising committee for the Pamoja project. Thus, a section of the public considers the project a political endeavour that is intended to mask authoritarianism and popularise the Ugandan regime.

This skepticism is further compounded when one analyze *who* exactly the state imagines as part of this integrated East Africa. While the rhetoric of Ubuntu relies on a collective, inclusive community, the state's execution of the Pamoja project reveals a highly restricted vision of regional identity. The narrative of "togetherness" often presumes an indigenous, homogenous, and predominantly male African subject, peripheralizing those who do not fit this mold. For instance, the region is home to significant minority populations, such as the Asian communities, who are consistently marginalized in nationalist discourses shaped by the postcolonial nation-state model (see Mamdani 2012).

This institutional exclusion is arguably also glaring in the gendered dimensions of the Pamoja project. Football, particularly in the East African political economy, is heavily masculinized; elite men's football is accorded far greater political capital than women's sports. The state wields this masculinized space as a primary tool for nation-building, effectively sidelining women from the regional integration narrative. This structural inequality is evident in the project's governance: in Uganda, only two of the fourteen members on the local organizing committee for AFCON 2027 are women. Furthermore, among the four female participants interviewed for this study, only one critically follows the sport, while the others cited severe safety concerns regarding stadium attendance. By centering a male-dominated arena as the vehicle for regional unity, the state's version of Pamoja fundamentally contradicts the inclusive, egalitarian ethos of Ubuntu. It highlights a critical feminist concern: the persistent peripheralization of women in the historical and contemporary narratives of African national movements.

Conclusion

Public sentiment regarding Pamoja's political and economic promise is deeply fractured. While the state presents the AFCON 2027 project through the unifying, decolonial language of Ubuntu, the reality of the project reflects the persistent institutional power dynamics of the postcolonial East African state. Rather than fostering genuine societal interdependence, Pamoja currently functions as a top-down, masculinized state project that masks unresolved interstate conflicts, economic struggles, and domestic inequalities. The marginalization of women, minorities, and the everyday citizen in the planning process demonstrates the inherent limits of state-led regional integration. However, if integration is treated not simply as a state-sanctioned mega-event but as an ongoing process rooted in the everyday cross-border interactions of society, then the critical discourses surrounding Pamoja, the very skepticism voiced by citizens, might be the necessary first step toward reclaiming a more inclusive, ground-level regional consciousness.

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Football Culture and Climate Adaptation in North-Western Nigeria, 2003-2024

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This study examines how grassroots football culture interacted with environmental conditions shaped by long-term climatic stress in communities across North-Western Nigeria. The region—comprising Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, and Zamfara States—is located within the Sudan and Sahel vegetation zones of Sub-Saharan Africa, areas historically characterized by ecological fragility. North-Western Nigeria experienced extreme heat throughout much of the year, with temperatures frequently exceeding 41°C, annual rainfall below 600 mm, and a prolonged Harmattan season (November–March) marked by dry air, intense heat, and severe wind erosion associated with Saharan climatic systems (Nigeria's Ministry of Environment 2003, 2014, 2020, 2021, and 2024). Proximity to the Sahara further intensified desertification and vegetation loss, generating persistent environmental pressures that shaped livelihoods and everyday social activities, including grassroots football.

The environmental pressures through which long-term climate stress were encountered in daily life included heat exposure, seasonal flooding, erosion, dust circulation, and vegetation loss—conditions that directly affected the organization, timing, and experience of football activities at the community level. Football fields and related practices thus emerged as sites where environmental vulnerability was materially experienced rather than abstractly conceptualized. At the same time, micro-anthropogenic practices embedded within football culture contributed to local environmental strain. The use of playing fields for cattle grazing, informal pitch maintenance, and waste disposal during community matches formed part of the everyday activities through which environmental pressures were reproduced and, in some cases, intensified. Yet, football spaces also functioned as arenas of social interaction where collective identities were formed and where local actors occasionally mobilized shared labor or awareness in response to environmental constraints. Rather than framing such actions as deliberate climate strategies, this study examined them as practices embedded within the routines and social organization of grassroots football.

The study analyzed how environmental conditions and football culture mutually shaped one another between 2003 and 2024. This period coincided with heightened national and international attention to environmental sustainability in Nigeria, beginning with Nigeria's 2003 report to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Subsequent legal and policy frameworks—such as the National Environmental Standards and Regulation Enforcement Agency (NESREA) Act of 2007 and the National Climate Change Policy (2021)—sought to address climate-related challenges at the state level. However, everyday experiences at the grassroots revealed persistent environmental constraints that often lay outside formal policy discourse, prompting a shift away from state-led frameworks towards lived realities. Rather than focusing on macro-level human-induced climate challenges and large-scale adaptation measures, the paper contributed to extant scholarship by examining how the micro-level activities of grassroots football communities experienced, exacerbated, interpreted, and responded to environmental pressures through everyday engagement with football.

The study adopted a qualitative approach, triangulating focus group discussions, participant observation, and oral interviews, with grassroots football workers selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Through thematic analysis involving open and axial coding, the study identified key patterns within participants'

narratives and strengthened analytical rigor through triangulation and member checking. It addressed a central question: how did environmental conditions shape football practices in North-Western Nigeria, and how did football-related activities, in turn, affect the local environment? By framing football culture not as a formal climate solution but as a non-state, grassroots social arena, the study illuminates how environmental pressures were experienced, negotiated, and occasionally responded to within everyday community life.

Historiography and Literature Review

Rising environmental challenges have generated sustained scholarly interest since the early twenty-first century, as both natural and anthropogenic factors intensified ecosystem uncertainty (IPCC 2014; Nigeria's Ministry of Environment 2003, 2014, 2020, 2021 & 2024; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005; Steffen et al. 2007; Enete 2014; Haider 2019; Manisalidis et al. 2020; Okon 2021; Jeremiah 2023; Layo et al. 2025). Parallel to this development, football attracted growing academic attention because of its global reach and social functions in peacebuilding, post-conflict rehabilitation, and community reintegration in regions such as Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Colombia, Congo, Nigeria, South Sudan, Brazil, and Somalia (Onwumechili 2010, 2014 & 2020; Kath et al. 2014; Eze et al. 2017; Ekemezie 2018; Wuilbercq 2021; Anyanwu 2024).

More recent scholarship began to examine football's relationship with environmental conditions. Mabon (2023) demonstrated that football and environmental pressures affected each other negatively, while also noting football's potential to encourage environmentally responsible behavior and observing that the literature remained largely Global North–centric. Hong et al. (2025) showed that the restructuring of U.S. college football conferences significantly increased travel-related carbon emissions, while the Dirty Tackle report (Scientists for Global Responsibility & New Weather Institute 2025) assessed football's global carbon footprint and highlighted its entanglements with polluting industries. Collectively, these studies foregrounded football's structural and institutional environmental implications rather than its everyday social practices.

In response to growing environmental scrutiny, football institutions across the world adopted various sustainability initiatives. Sancroft (2022) documented Tottenham Hotspur's Zero Game initiative, while Saini (2025) examined solar energy deployment at the stadia of Manchester City and Ajax. SportsPro (2025) presented UEFA Euro 2024 as evidence that embedding sustainability within elite football structures could reduce emissions, while Sports & Sustainability International (2022) highlighted the Qatar 2022 World Cup as an example of football-led environmental advocacy. While these studies illuminated institutional responses, they focused primarily on elite football in the Global North and gave limited attention to community-level practices in environmentally vulnerable regions.

A growing body of scholarship also explored the football community as environmental actors. The Sustainability Report (2021) examined the UK-based Pledgeball initiative, demonstrating how fan engagement could promote recycling and reduce energy use. Amann (2022) argued that fan participation enhanced pro-environmental behavior, while Doidge and Amann (2023) framed fandom as a source of hope in responding to environmental challenges. Kraft et al. (2025) further showed that environmental perceptions shaped fans' well-being and sense of purpose. Beyond fandom, football was increasingly positioned as a platform for broader environmental discourse. Austmo Wagan (2024) examined sustainability debates within football, aligning with Forbes' (2024) analysis of football–environment intersections in Mexico and Baldwin's (2023) argument that football enabled engagement beyond conventional environmental actors. Community-based perspectives, however, received comparatively less attention. Bunds and Casper (2021), Orr and Kellison (2020) and Carmichael (2020), demonstrated how community football structures intersected ecological and social concerns, while Goldblatt (2023) called for more historically grounded and socially embedded analyses of sport and environmental change.

Rather than advancing normative policy prescriptions, this study situates football within everyday environmental constraints, showing how grassroots practices both reflected and shaped local ecological conditions in African communities. In doing so, it contributed an empirically grounded African grassroots perspective to scholarship on sport and environmental change, historicizing football culture as a site where environmental pressures were experienced, interpreted, and negotiated at the community level.

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on Arnold Toynbee's (1947) Challenge and Response Theory (CRT).

Toynbee argued that the rise and decline of civilizations depend less on the challenges they face than on how societies respond to them. CRT conceptualizes challenges as threats to societal continuity arising from factors such as climate variability, population pressure, and famine. Since such challenges are persistent, adaptive responses—rather than the challenges themselves—become decisive. Positive responses may generate relative stability, while negative responses, including inaction or maladaptation, often result in adverse social and environmental outcomes.

CRT provides a useful framework for examining how grassroots football culture in North-Western Nigeria has interacted with environmental pressures over time. Rather than assuming that climate stress automatically produces decline, the theory directs attention to everyday social practices through which communities negotiate environmental constraints. Football represents a socio-cultural practice through which environmental challenges are experienced, managed, and sometimes unintentionally intensified. Although responses to environmental stress in North-Western Nigeria have produced mixed outcomes, CRT allows for an analysis of how adaptive and maladaptive practices coexist. Football activities reflect broader patterns of response to environmental pressures—ranging from match cancellations, altered training routines, and improvised field maintenance to practices that exacerbate land degradation and safety risks.

In this sense, football culture is treated as a site where responses to environmental challenges are negotiated rather than resolved.

To contextualize this analysis, the study briefly acknowledges existing scholarship that has framed football as a response to environmental challenges in other settings. For example, Sky Sports (2021) reported on a net-zero-carbon Zero Game match between Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea on 19 September 2021, while Green Football (2025) documented Nottingham Forest Football Club's engagement with environmental initiatives in Nottinghamshire, England. While significant differences in scale, resources, and institutional capacity distinguish these elite contexts from grassroots football in North-Western Nigeria, such examples demonstrate how football has been interpreted elsewhere as a social response to environmental pressures. Furthermore, this study departs from celebratory or prescriptive approaches by grounding its analysis in community-level evidence. Consistent with Toynbee's emphasis on historically situated responses, the paper uses CRT to interpret how football culture in North-Western Nigeria has evolved within specific environmental constraints. In doing so, it highlights football as a lens through which adaptive practices—and their limitations—can be historically understood, rather than as a universal or scalable solution to environmental change.

Football Culture and Environmental Interactions in North-Western Nigeria

In North-Western Nigeria, environmental pressures intersected with existing vulnerabilities in informal sectors beyond football. It shaped everyday sporting activities in both material and social terms. A grassroots footballer from Kaduna, H. Aminu[1], recounted that "extreme heat, seasonal flooding, wind erosion, and vegetation loss directly affect training routines, match quality, and participation decisions." His account was corroborated by another grassroots footballer from Jigawa, A. Waziri[2], who observed that "coaches and community organizers frequently adjusted activities according to thermal conditions, adopting informal heat-mitigation strategies such

as increased hydration, shortened match duration, and flexible training schedules." A. Pogba[3] shared a similar experience, noting that "we do not always have fixed days for training here at Narayi Ungwan Maigero because we hardly predict what the weather has in stock. So we sometimes get information on our WhatsApp group, sometimes one hour before playing." Participants in a focus-group discussion in Kano[4] indicated that decisions about when and where to play were negotiated around seasonal heat intensity and local weather forecasts rather than formal league calendars. In this sense, football activities in the region were embedded within environmental rhythms, demonstrating how climatic stressors structured social and sporting routines.

At the same time, certain football-related practices contributed to environmental strain. S. Garuba[5], U. Adamu[6], and B. Musa[7] narrated that in many communities, including Sabon Gari, Tudun Wada, Kakuri Gwari, Durun, Garko, Yakasai, Abukur, Mairuwa, and Zauma, fans and villagers used cattle herds to graze football fields as a means of trimming grass. While perceived locally as practical and cost-effective, this practice had unintended ecological consequences. T. Aminu[8] explained that "nomadic farmers graze livestock on football fields, believing it helps maintain the surface. However, grazing litters the fields with dung and creates potholes, exacerbating erosion and increasing injury risks to players." He further noted that the gradual removal of grass cover intensified sand exposure and wind activity, leaving playing fields increasingly bare and uneven. M. Umaru[9] similarly remarked that grazing raised maintenance costs and heightened safety risks, stating:

> Fans and village people dey bring cattle to come chop for the field because they wan use am help us cut our grass, but many time when they do that, cattle dey create hole for the field, and we fit break our leg or fall for cow shit during ball. Sometimes when you dey run and match cow shit e go draw you down, and you fit wound yourself.

In some communities, fans and villagers bring cattle onto the playing field to graze, using them as a natural way to cut the grass. While practical, this practice leaves holes that make the ground uneven and heighten the risk of sprains or fractures. Cow dung also creates sanitary and safety concerns, as players may slip, fall, and sustain injuries.

Environmental degradation associated with overgrazing and vegetation loss on and around pitches was particularly visible in rural and peri-urban sports landscapes in Kaduna, Kano, and Katsina, where competition between recreational fields and grazing livestock or agricultural activities altered natural surfaces.[10] Participant observation confirmed that reduced grass cover exposed sandy soil, increasing dust circulation during the Harmattan season and impairing visibility and respiration during matches. These dynamics illustrate that football fields functioned not merely as sporting spaces, but as contested ecological sites, where local environmental pressures and human practices intersected materially and socially.

Littering associated with football gatherings represented another dimension of environmental interaction. Y. Nuhu[11] and M. Sanusi[12] repeatedly described how plastics, food packaging, and discarded materials accumulated after matches, particularly during finals and community tournaments. A. Pogba[13] added that "most times, we train on these wastes; some other times, we handpick them before playing, and some of us get tired of playing after the stress of going round to sanitize the environment." D. Moses[14] corroborated that "after the finals of big games, the plastics and other wastes are heaped in gutters. But when it rains, it becomes another challenge because they block waterways, leading to flooding in the villages, which spreads the waste all over."

Taken together, community-based evidence highlights the dual character of football culture in North-Western Nigeria in its interactions with the environment. Environmental pressures—heat, erosion, flooding, and vegetation loss—directly shaped how football was organized and experienced. Simultaneously, everyday practices associated with pitch maintenance and match hosting contributed to ecological strain. Analytically, rather than presenting football as

either a passive victim or a universal solution, this study historicized it as a social arena in which environmental constraints and community practices intersected, revealing patterns of adaptation, negotiation, and unintended consequences within grassroots sport.

Football as a Social Arena of Environmental Adaptation

Recent global discussions, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's Sports for Climate Action Framework, noted football's potential to engage diverse populations in conversations about environmental responsibility (UNFCCC, 2024). While much of this institutional engagement has developed in the Global North, the communal character of African football cultures provided a distinct social context within which environmental challenges were experienced and responded to. Alegi (2010) demonstrated how African football has historically been embedded within broader social and cultural practices, including the promotion of solidarity, collective identity, and shared belonging. According to a report published by Footy Naija (2026), former Super Eagles, Nigeria's male national team coach Gernot Rohr highlighted the intensity of communal engagement in African football:

> It's the passion that makes this competition [African Cup of Nations] unique. Everything is amplified: the joy, the sadness. There are more colours, more music, and drums in the stadiums. An atmosphere you don't find in Europe. Here [Africa], we play for the country, not for lucrative contracts. Some players earn little, but they give everything for their country.

This assessment resonated with findings from fieldwork in North-Western Nigeria. I. Aliyu[15] narrated that "some of our games are not all about scoring goals or winning, but to keep body and soul together," adding that "people tend to act uniformly towards community projects and for a better environment when they play together." L. Mohammed[16] provided a concrete example:

> After a heavy rain and flood in Gumawa, Kano State, which created gullies, it was my boys who used shovels, wheelbarrows, and other personal belongings to make the roads manageable. That is one of the goals of football here: a habitable environment, not always about trophies. Here, football networks functioned as informal mobilization structures that facilitated community responses to environmental constraints, including post-flood repairs and erosion management.

Similarly, D. Chumaro[17], a grassroots football coach in the region, recalled encouraging players and fans to plant trees within their communities to reduce wind erosion, noting that sensitization efforts were organised to discourage overgrazing on football fields and surrounding areas—reflecting community responses to environmental constraints rather than formal climate advocacy. These accounts collectively demonstrate that football spaces in North-Western Nigerian rural communities often operated as arenas for social negotiation around environmental pressures. Analytically, football culture in this context illuminates how grassroots social networks intersect with ecological realities, shaping patterns of adaptation and everyday resilience.

Conclusion

This study examined the interplay between environmental pressures and football culture in North-Western Nigeria, revealing that each directly shaped the other. Environmental stressors — including extreme heat, seasonal flooding, wind erosion, and vegetation loss—disrupted training routines, match scheduling, and participation patterns. At the same time, community practices around football pitches, particularly overgrazing and poor waste management, further degraded playing surfaces and intensified localized ecological strain. Football fields thus emerged as spaces where environmental vulnerability and everyday social practices intersected. Grounded in oral narratives, focus group discussions, and participant observation, the findings demonstrated that football functioned as a significant social institution within the region, organizing collective identities and informal networks that extended beyond the

pitch. In moments of ecological stress—such as post-flood repairs or efforts to manage erosion—these networks facilitated collective labour and environmental awareness, even when such actions remained modest, informal, and locally bounded. Rather than presenting football as a technical solution to climate change, the study historicized it as a social arena in which environmental challenges were experienced, negotiated, and occasionally reshaped through community interaction.

By situating these dynamics historically and empirically, the study contributed a grassroots-based African perspective to scholarship on sport and environmental change. Grassroots football in North-Western Nigeria emerged not simply as a victim of environmental pressures nor as a universal model of adaptation, but as a culturally embedded practice through which environmental constraints and community responses became visible. This emphasized the importance of examining everyday social institutions to understand how environmental stress was lived and interpreted within vulnerable regions.

Analytically, these findings were illuminated through Arnold Toynbee's Challenge and Response framework, which posits that societal outcomes are shaped less by environmental challenges themselves than by how communities respond. Evidence from fieldwork indicated that football-related activities intersected with environmental practices such as controlling overgrazing and participating in grass and tree planting—actions that local actors associated with reducing heat exposure, soil erosion, and sandstorms. Without oversimplifying climate action, the study interpreted these practices as locally grounded responses to environmental constraints, rather than deliberate climate strategies or prescriptive interventions. In this sense, grassroots football did not function as a formal model for climate intervention but as a social space in which adaptive behaviors emerged organically. While these practices remained modest and context-specific, they offered valuable insight into how environmental challenges were negotiated at the community level, contributing to broader understandings of adaptation without assuming universal applicability or scalability.

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Endnotes

1 H. Aminu, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kaduna, October 3, 2025.
2 A. Waziri, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Jigawa, August 8, 2025.
3 A. Pogba, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kaduna, August 8, 2025.
4 T. Aminu, I. Danjuma, D. Muhammed, and N. Uba, focus group discussion with Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kano, August 8, 2025.
5 S. Garuba, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kaduna, March 11, 2024.
6 U. Adamu, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kaduna, March 11, 2024.
7 B. Musa, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kano, August 8, 2025.
8 T. Aminu, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Katsina, August 8, 2025.
9 M. Umaru, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Sokoto, August 1, 2025.
10 A. Ibrahim, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kano, June 25, 2025.
11 Y. Nuhu, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kano, June 25, 2025.
12 M. Sanusi, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kano,August 17, 2025.
13 Pogba, interview by Anyanwu, August 8, 2025.
14 D. Moses, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kaduna, September 22, 2025.
15 I. Aliyu, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Sokoto, September 22, 2025.
16 L. Mohammed, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kano, June 10, 2025.
17 D. Chumaro, interview by Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Zamfara, April 23, 2024.

The Program on African Social Research aims to provide opportunities for feedback, networking, mentoring, and meaningful collaborative possibilities between junior scholars based in Africa and established scholars based both within and outside of the continent, especially those with diasporic and other ties to African countries. PASR is supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is based at the Marxe School of Public and International Affairs, Baruch College, City University of New York.

