

JAHAZI

Culture
Arts
Performance

Vol 12 issue 1, 2024



Arts, Digital Technology
& The Gen Z Protests in Kenya

Jahazi Has It!

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Jahazi Vol 12 Issue 1, 2024

Arts, Digital Technology & The Gen Z Protests in Kenya

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The Journal is the result of an initiative by Twaweza Communications - Nairobi, and founding Editor, Bantu Mwaura, to encourage dialogue between academicians and art practitioners. The space is used to capture practical experiences in arts, culture and performance in Kenya and the East African region and suggest theoretical and policy directions.

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From the Editor

Mwenda Ntarangwi

A revolution entails rapid or sudden shifts and changes that affect structures, processes and even societies. One of the instruments of such revolutionary change is technology. Observers of human history tell us that it is as a result of technological changes that communication, mobility, and even our own health became what they are today. We travel faster and further, we communicate with each other in real time and effectively and live longer because of these changes. Although these changes have not affected all humans equally there is a level at which they have had some element of influence on all of us. As a journal focused on culture, the arts and performance, *Jahazi* has had its own encounter with these changes—embracing the digital space to reach its readers, adapting to Artificial Intelligence (AI) to produce its cover and some of the images included in this issue, and adapting to a distribution model produced by the said technological changes not to mention recording some of these changes through stories and essays as they affect society.

In this issue we focus on this revolution through technology and how it has shaped education, politics, the economy, and human creativity in general. We seek to understand how technological changes or advancements have shaped such activities as creative writing, teaching, and even playing traditional games; how technology has allowed for youth to mobilize themselves and lead an unprecedented social movement in a short time. A lot has been going on since the last issue of the journal and we have sought to capture a slice of those changes here as they affect culture, the arts and performance. We have even assembled many more articles than usual, combining articles on technology as mostly expressed through AI and various articulations of the Gen Z movement that was witnessed in Kenya in June and July 2024. The term Gen Z is used in the journal to denote individuals born in the late 1990s and mid 2000s and to people who are tech savvy, mobilize through social media and participated in protests against the government in mid 2024.

In all generations and societies there are watershed moments that leave a mark on society and its cultural practices. Artificial Intelligence (captured in the first part of the issue) and the Gen Z movement (captured in the second part of the issue) have been such moments in Kenya in 2024 and *Jahazi* is privileged to offer perspectives on the two as articulated by scholars and practitioners from different slices of the Kenyan society. In my field of cultural anthropology, we know that humans have learned to navigate the world through clear processes of sharing knowledge that has been passed from generation to another. We are also aware that when communities or even large societies remain oblivious to their history or ignore past cultural artefacts, they stand the danger of repeating past mistakes or adopting other people's cultural practices uncritically. Indeed, with the fast-paced technological changes that we have witnessed in the last few decades, many cultural products have almost become extinct. This we state without losing sight of the fact that culture is dynamic and always changing. There are disruptions that bring about great cultural loss where such changes are taken in and local practices are abandoned. It is good to see scholars seeking to address this matter in this issue with contributions by Kiiru, Ngano and Shapiro exploring how digitization can help preserve music, games and culture, respectively. Such preservation not only provides a reference for our cultural history but becomes a great resource for students of culture seeking to understand contemporary life by juxtaposing it against that of yesteryears.

The bulk of the contributions in this section, however, is taken up by a focus on AI. The level of angst surrounding the pervasive nature of AI in many of our professional and personal practices is palpable. Much of the anecdotal observations I have made regarding AI has been characterized by fear and at times outright opposition. It is exciting, therefore, to see six articles in this section that are dedicated to AI and its use or interactions with and in such areas as university examinations, creative writing, art, and theatre, which engage both the advantages and challenges AI brings to these respective spheres. Technology as expressed through AI is here to stay and it is only in our willingness to interrogate, engage, and localize it that we will be able to make the most out of it. To shun it or oppose it simply because we want to restrict students from using AI to write essays for our courses, for instance, is to fail to ask what it is we are trying to teach students and why is the use of AI detrimental to that which we wish to teach. Maybe it is a good thing that we have students seeking to use AI to write course essays because it forces us to ask deep questions about what and why we teach. Otherwise, it is futile to try and ban them from using AI because technology has a way of infiltrating our everyday lives in ways that require tact and wisdom, and that we cannot successfully keep out. They say if you cannot beat them, join them. It is hence quite exciting to see that the set of articles in this section are not about the “hostile takeover” by AI but rather explore how AI can, for instance, be used to restore and/or represent artefacts; how it can be used to assist in content creation; and the role of AI in/with/for creative writing. Such explorations are promising to give us insights into AI and our world of cultural productions of all forms and expressions.

The second part of the journal articles comprises pieces focusing on the Gen Z demonstrations witnessed in Kenya primarily in the months of June and July 2024. The demonstrations or *maandamano* as they were referred to locally, gained attention because they differed with past demonstrations in three ways—they were not led by a politician, they were mostly organized on social media, and they took place in different urban centres around the country simultaneously. This new way of mass organizing has impressed many including some contributors to this issue of *Jahazi* to assume that it is the first time youth have taken the lead in organizing national demonstrations. It may be the first time youth have mobilized each other through social media for events that culminated in street demonstrations but most revolutions and political changes have often been triggered and led by youth around the world. In Kenya university students have been at the centre of many demonstrations that have brought to the fore political and economic issues. Even during the colonial period, the majority of those that took up arms and strategized to fight the colonialists were young people. In this issue we have provided you with articles that take you to the heart of the *maandamano* as narrated by those that were in the cities as they unfolded and also give you a reflective view taken by those others observing them from afar or from a critical or academic angle. In the wake of reported apathy towards the electoral process with very few youths in Kenya voting in the national elections, the Gen Z movement reported in many of the entries here evokes mixed feelings. On the one hand there is this celebration of a “new dawn” in Kenya’s political engagement as youth hold leaders to account for development projects and their political promises. But on the other hand, there is the skepticism born out of past experiences that has led to questions of the ability of the movement and the subsequent agitations that can culminate in electing better leaders and changing entrenched socio-economic and political process for the good of the citizens. Will the energy and support witnessed during *maandamano* translate into good governance, better use of public resources, or improved social services? What really was the driving force behind them and will it be available especially during election times? Only time will tell. What we know is that technology is part of our culture and our cultural practices and expressions cannot live without it. This issue of *Jahazi* provides but a slice of that reality.

From the Publisher

Kimani Njogu

LEADERS WHO ARE COMMITTED to their communities practice ‘deep listening’; a form of listening that is purposive, attentive, and empathetic. In its nature, listening is, itself, an art which sadly, many leaders have little capacity for due to their tendency to be inward looking and their self-centered hunger and impatience for power and control. To listen deeply, leaders must be prepared to withstand the pain that comes with hearing and absorbing the voices of ‘others’ and being empathetic to their suffering. By listening and putting themselves in the shoes of their communities, leaders can be more caring and service driven.

This failure to listen to citizens was manifested most poignantly in Kenya when the youth told the government that they were angry with the draconian 2024 Financial Bill. Overburdened by taxes introduced since President Ruto ascended to the Presidency in 2022 such as the fuel levy without visible improvement in service delivery or evidence of government accountability in use of public resources, the anger among Kenyans has been simmering and ready for a trigger. On May 9th 2024, the 2024 Finance Bill was submitted to by the Cabinet Secretary for National Treasury and Economic Planning and published in the Kenya Gazette. It proposed tax hikes on most goods and services with a ripple effect on retail, finance, internet, transport and manufacturing sectors. In addition to a motor vehicle tax pegged at 2% the value of the vehicle, taxation of income from operation of digital marketplace or platform and digital content monetization was introduced.

The anger over excessive taxation was exacerbated by the abuse of power and authority through malfeasance in office, unchecked greed, the arrogance and insensitivity of the political class, and the widening chasm between the rich and the poor. The open and ostentatious display of recent wealth among the political elite in a context of poverty, unemployment and sense of despair and hopelessness heightened the resolve of Kenyan youth to express their anger strongly through all available platforms. The youth hoped that the political leadership would listen to them and take concrete actions to address their concerns.

Although listening is an important skill of survival, the political class did not appear to pay attention to it as the youth spoke. Instead, they shouted louder and louder. Parliament was unable to provide oversight on the executive and the majority of its members danced to the tune of the executive. The youth felt let down by their elected representative and retreated to use the available tools to utilize their ‘residual power’ (having delegated some of it to Members of Parliament) to express their opposition at state excesses. They not only resorted to digital technology but also utilized Sheng and Kenyan languages to mobilize and build horizontal solidarities. They broke down the Finance Bill and provided credible arguments against it. They went to the streets to protest.

The Jahazi Editorial Board was at the time reviewing articles on art and digital technology in Kenya. The Board met to make a decision on how the Journal could capture the moment. On the table was the fact that the country was rocked by protests that challenged two arms of government: the executive and the legislature. We had witnessed how on June 25th, 2024, angry youth entered parliament after legislators passed the contentious 2024 Finance Bill despite widespread national protests against it. Parts of parliament were set ablaze. Many protestors were killed, arrested or forcefully disappeared through abductions by state agencies. For the first

time since the 1982 attempted coup d'état, the government deployed military to the streets. Although Kenyans have always used peaceful protests to show dissatisfaction with the state, at every turn, police brutality at the protesters have ensured that most demonstrations turn violent. The 2024 protests were national: protestors came from all corners of the country carrying mobile phones and the national flag. There were protests in Eldoret, Lodwar, Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisii and Nairobi among other urban areas. They were youth led and organic.

After Parliament was breached at the height of the demonstrations, President William called the protestors criminals and treasonous. A day later, on June 26th, he announced the withdrawal of the Finance Bill. But the youth did not consider the withdrawal good enough. Many of their comrades had been murdered, disappeared or arrested. On July 7th, they organized a concert to commemorate the Gen Z protestors killed by the state. The tech savvy ones set up platforms to track promises made and unfulfilled.

On July 11th, the President dismissed the entire cabinet except for the Deputy President and Prime Cabinet Secretary. Meanwhile, as the protests subsided, local level issues targeting Members of Parliament and county governments emerged. The Gen Z had taken their demands for accountability to the local leadership.

The Gen Z protests, as the essays in this volume show, were without mainstream political leaders. The youth were galvanized by their dissatisfaction with the political class. The protests were beyond the Finance Bill: they were clearly a statement that the political and economic direction that Kenyan leaders had chosen was untenable. The cost of living was too high, the taxes were impoverishing and unemployment rates were unacceptable. Many felt that taxation did not lead to better public service and representation of citizen interests.

To strengthen its hold on power under the intensifying pressure, the executive reached out to the leadership of opposition ODM party in a political power sharing plan despite earlier statements rejecting the possibility of such arrangement. The consensus substantially strengthened Ruto's hold on power and enabled him to pass certain Bills, including a motion impeaching the Deputy President. This volume speaks to some of these issues.

Over the last decade Kenya's digital penetration has been growing. Internet penetration is estimated at 56.03%, the number of households with internet access at home is about 5.74 million, 4G network coverage at 100% and the total consumer spending in ICT equipment estimated at USD 297.80 million (www.statista.com/outlook/co/digital-connectivity-indicators/Kenya). This technological leap in Kenya has created a digital community that can engage and self-organize online to address key national issues. The digital space has completely civic engagement in Kenya.

The Gen Z protests used art in its various forms to express their opinion about Kenya's political and economic choices. They leaned on graffiti art, music, TikTok and fashion to convey messages, underline identity, and signal solidarity. Art was used to mark courage, resistance, togetherness, and individuality. Throughout the protests, strong messages of rampant injustices, economic inequalities and political insensitivity emerged in texts, audio-visual images and body-language. They carried the national flag as a sign of national pride.

Reflecting on these events, the Jahazi Board decided to review the Call for Articles to incorporate perspectives by the youth around the Finance Bill related protests. The decision to publish reflections on the Gen Z protests was informed by the journal's mission of documenting and archiving the art and culture scene in East Africa. Publishing these articles is aligned to the tenets of freedom of expression protected by the Constitution of Kenya. It is our hope that this issue of Jahazi provides a perspective on how the youth in Kenya used art and digital technology to speak truth to power.



Algorithms and Ancestry: On Artificial Intelligence and Cultural Restitution

Gideon Ngaruiya

“We are our stories.” This (perhaps clichéd) maxim highlights the importance of cultural heritage in our identity. The concept of the self, as an individual and as part of a community, is that of a progression of an ongoing story and as is true in literature and in life, any character without a history, a context, motivations and values, is incomplete and uncertain of their identity. Who are we then, when our stories are taken from us, stolen, reshaped and retold in far off lands? Who are we when our stories are derided, and new stories forced upon us?

The narrative of cultural representation in the digital space intersects with power dynamics, as Olu Oguibe astutely points it, “...the privilege of definition – deciding what counts as culture, art, or indeed anything else – is the privilege of power.” This power dynamic is evident in the historical context of colonialism in Africa, where indigenous artistic forms were suppressed. The theft of cultural heritage objects and history deprives communities of memory, knowledge, custom and identity for generations.

This erasure of cultural identity laid the groundwork for the manufacture of the “mimic man,” where indigenous artists were marginalised and relegated to the status of utilitarian craftsmen. This dynamic continues to exist as generative Artificial Intelligence gains an ever-increasing foothold in creative production, and where the prioritisation of speed and scale sometimes overshadows innovation, usefulness, and originality.

The Need for Cultural Restitution

Cultural restitution, the process of returning cultural artefacts to their countries of origin, has gained increasing prominence in recent years as part of broader efforts to rectify historical injustices and promote cultural equity. This restitution goes beyond the tangible as these artefacts have intangible value through their meaning, symbolic socio-political relationships, artistic merit, and institutional memory over time.

African art pieces and artefacts currently housed in European museums were acquired through colonial exploitation, theft, or coercion, depriving African communities of not just the items themselves but the cultural value attached to these items. These items were taken deliberately to disrupt the cultural and spiritual connection across generations during the attacks and looting of the colonial period. Arguments for their continued presence in these spaces include conflicting local laws (such as the British Museum Act of 1963), the operation of these museums as a universal space for public education and artistic inspiration and that these items were acquired “legally”. Were any artefacts acquired legally? As gifts?

In a 2023 interview, the British Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media stated that “[restitution] is a dangerous road to go down as it would open the gateway to questioning the entire contents of our museum.”

Pending the progress of negotiations on the restitution of the physical items, it is possible to create digital versions and make them accessible to the world on terms reflective of the social and cultural values of their communities-of-origin.

Digital Recreation of Cultural Artefacts

This physical and digital interaction not only facilitates access to cultural information but also serves as a form of symbolic restitution, acknowledging the intrinsic value and significance of African cultural heritage and allows for a rebuilding of the chain of knowledge and memory across generations.

This is not and cannot be an adequate substitute for physical restitution. Unfettered access to cultural sites and physical possession of these artefacts by the communities-of-origin that understand the symbolic value is necessary, just, right, and overdue.

This struggle is not unique to African art or African artists, however. African art does face a unique challenge with regards to data unavailability and inaccuracy. Cultural artefacts and narratives about Africa are written about, stored, and shaped in the Global North, with limited interaction with their source communities, leading to inaccuracies and misinformation. In the digital era, this has contributed to the perceptions on broadcast media, the internet, and social media. As these very sources are used to train artificial intelligence systems, the challenge is compounded with every subsequent generation of information being based on increasingly inaccurate information. This heralds a post-truth reality where the facts of history are once again rewritten and the truth about African culture defined by those in a position of power and privilege.

The blueprint for an AI framework rests on key pillars, that is: the use case, the training data and algorithms, the technical infrastructure, human knowledge and talent and the policy environment. The quality of each of these pillars impacts the system's character and usability.

The datasets used to train AI systems often reflect historical biases and colonial legacies, perpetuating stereotypes and misrepresentations of African art and culture. For instance, datasets may be sourced from historical records and repositories that are tainted by overt racism, ignorance, and misguided notions of civilization. As a result, AI systems may reproduce these biases, reinforcing existing power dynamics and marginalising authentic voices. This is easily visible in the "African village" stereotypical images generated by Gen-AI platforms.

Algorithms, the logical frameworks that process data and generate insights, are not inherently designed to be inclusive or considerate of the diverse contexts of African art. Instead, they operate based on predetermined criteria and patterns, which may not adequately capture the nuances and complexities of African artistic traditions. Furthermore, the lack of diversity in the development teams may further exacerbate biases and perpetuate exclusionary practices. We see this in the treatment of indigenous languages and with specific reference to exclusion of non-dominant languages in large language models.

Artificial intelligence systems, when designed or trained in such circumstances and with such limitations, can at best imitate or infer the centuries of stories, myths and practices of a community, this approximation is merely functional and not substantive.

AI systems are, however, remarkably good at pattern recognition, data retrieval and probabilistic inference. This can be useful to begin to rebuild a bridge between the lost and stolen cultural knowledge from the colonial and precolonial period and the yearning present by bolstering the argument for cultural restitution that empowers a new generation of makers and storytellers to continue to create an Africa-centred post-colonial identity.

Using AI for Digital Reconstruction

AI can facilitate the restoration and preservation of deteriorating artefacts using such techniques as image recognition, pattern analysis, and generative modelling. Used alongside-

human feedback about these items and their contexts of creation and use, artists can reclaim agency over their cultural narratives and assert ownership of their artistic heritage and reimagine interpretations of these artefacts.

Current technology allows use of Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN) for image classification and Generative Adversarial Networks (GAN) for data generation as separate models. The models would be trained partially by humans through Reinforcement Learning with Human Feedback (RLHF) provided by specialized knowledge workers to improve accuracy. These models would be organized in layers using a Mixture of Experts (MoE) approach where each model performs different tasks based on its competence. After validation, the system would then be used in the restoration process to restore artefacts or to function as teaching guides for emerging artisans.

Working with the CNNs and GANs is a multi-step process which leverages both image and text data. This involves taking high-resolution images of the artefacts then annotating these with accurate contextual information. The images would be segmented to isolate both the edges and shapes at different sizes and perspectives. This can be used as training data for the convolutional neural network in the generalization of unseen images. With this process, the CNN would be able to recognise the patterns, shapes and textures of the various artefacts. The GAN would create images of restored artefacts based on the data generated by the CNN in an iterative process. This process would be supported further by input from the knowledge workers allowing the neural network to continuously improve its accuracy in a virtuous loop. The final model would then be tested on unseen data to determine if it can generalize sufficiently accurately to be used in artefact restoration.

If successful, the model would be able to reconstruct digital versions of deteriorated artefacts and make these available for display or 3D printing of replicas which can be housed in museums.

This approach would remove the need for storage of thousands of artefacts in museums in the Global North on grounds of restoration and preservation. It sets the tone for items to be repatriated and for the process of cultural restitution to gain momentum.

A similar approach has been proposed by Gaber et al (2023) for use in artwork restoration and Wu et al (2023) for artefact image synthesis.


Challenges of the Restitution Process

AI-enabled cultural restitution is not without challenges. Beyond the technical requirements in this process, there is a cultural gap component.


The technologies anticipated to be used are novel and the process of their development, especially with regards to pre-trained models, may centre the perspectives and biases of the inventors and this can have a rollover impact. This could lead to misinterpretations or oversimplifications of cultural artefacts' significance, symbolism, or historical context.

If the AI system is primarily developed using Western languages, it might struggle with accurately interpreting and representing information in African languages, leading to loss of cultural nuances. The historical dearth of representation and digitisation of written and oral literature, historical records, and traditional crafting philosophies creates a knowledge gap that AI may struggle to bridge. This could result in the inaccurate replication of traditional African artistic techniques, leading to flawed restorations or misguided teachings for emerging artisans.

While the system includes RLHF from specialised knowledge workers, there might be insufficient representation from African scholars, artists, and cultural experts in this feedback loop. This could lead to a continuation of Western-centric interpretations of African artefacts.



AI can facilitate the restoration and preservation of deteriorating artefacts using such techniques as image recognition, pattern analysis, and generative modelling. Used alongside human feedback about these items and their contexts of creation and use, artists can reclaim agency over their cultural narratives and assert ownership of their artistic heritage and reimagine interpretations of these artefacts.





The knowledge workers who provide the Human Feedback component of the Reinforcement Learning with Human Feedback approach should have specialized domain knowledge in the particular cultural and social histories and contexts of the artefacts to ensure that the quality of feedback is sufficient. This challenge due to the passage of time, the deliberate erasure of social history due to colonisation and successive demonization of traditional knowledge, practices and the misremembering of traditional Kenyan cultures has an impact on the quality of the solution.

It is also important to consider the power dynamics at play. The approach also requires buy-in from the current holders of these artefacts in order to conduct the photogrammetry scans. This may not be in their interest as it may diminish their perceived relevance as gatekeepers to these valuable artefacts. The implementation of such AI systems might reinforce existing power imbalances if the decision-making process about restitution and restoration remains primarily in the hands of Western institutions.

The rightful owners of these artefacts may either be unwilling or unable to receive and house the repatriated artefacts due to their perceived desecration. Many artefacts hold spiritual or religious significance, and the disruption of their original context can diminish their sacred value. The process of removal, display, and handling by foreign institutions may have stripped these items of their spiritual essence, making them no longer suitable for traditional rituals or practices. Additionally, the physical condition of the artefacts after years in foreign environments might be seen as further evidence of their desecration, complicating their reintegration into cultural and religious life.

This dilemma highlights the complex challenges involved in the repatriation process, where the return of artefacts is not just a matter of ownership, but also of restoring their cultural and spiritual integrity. This notwithstanding, AI-enabled cultural restitution is not new.

Minne Atairu, a multidisciplinary artist used images from the Benin Bronzes and a Generative Adversarial Network to create Igùn, concept designs of bronze statues based on protocols by the royal guild of bronze casters of the Kingdom of Benin. This project imagines and materialises the potential productions resulting from uninterrupted access to the Benin Bronzes by subsequent artists. Her approach enhances art education about a neglected yet highly important period of African art and the results of continued post-colonial cultural disenfranchisement.

Closer home, the Invisible Inventories program by The NEST Collective, The National Museums of Kenya, the Weltkulturen Museum, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, the SHIFT Collective and the Goethe-Institut furthers this conversation by investigating the provenance of artefacts in Western institutions. The program researches this as part of a re-membering of the cultural memory and identity stolen during the colonial period. Working with Denis Poriot of Beyond 3D Afrika, they have commissioned the creation of 3D replicas of culturally important artefacts such as head-dresses.

Cultural theory has held that the value of artefacts is not the mere physical objects but also their historical, social, and cultural significance in the embodiment and transport of meaning, beliefs and values of the individuals and communities that make and use them.

Importantly, the risk of reinventing or misrepresenting objects of material culture as exclusively objets d'art increases as they are further removed from their intended setting and become limited to a 300-word curatorial text. The risk of viewing cultural artefacts through the curatorial texts is their incompleteness due to the subtext and nuance that can only be expressed in situ. This also freezes these artefacts in time which contributes to troubling imperial, colonial, neo-colonial, and techno-colonial perspectives.

As culture is a public good, beyond the steadfast efforts of concerned individuals and small groups, there is a need for a nation-level effort in this endeavour. The importance of a cultural policy that is aware, supportive, and promotive of the value of cultural and intellectual property rights of the people is only compounded by the advent of artificial intelligence technology.

An AI-Aware Cultural Policy

Article 11 of the Constitution of Kenya enshrines the foundational position of culture in nation-building and in Article 40 (5) highlights the obligation of the Government to protect and promote the intellectual property rights of the people of Kenya.

The National Policy on Culture and Heritage is a response to this mandate. It identifies information technology as an opportunity for cultural advancement, promotes the appreciation of intangible culture heritage and the transmission of indigenous knowledge.

Specifically, the National Policy in Chapters 10 and 12 outlines the role of continuing education in cultural and creative industries and the role of administrative institutions in this process.

Technology is heavily influenced by those “who build it and the data that feeds it”. Capacity development in AI skills for use in the creative and cultural industries allows for alternatives to the Western concepts of rationality that underpin current AI technologies. From a technical perspective, the opportunity in creating a knowledge-aware LLM and pre-training a model with Kenyan cultural information allows for visualizations of a wide variety of artefacts.

As AI technology advances rapidly, perhaps more rapidly than cultural policy, the need to define and practise the principles of transparency, explainability, accountability in its development and use within the cultural knowledge space is essential in determining the next chapter of our collective story.

Ethical Data Collection

This is grounded on the principles of data justice.

Visibility

Community members should be fully informed about the data collection process and its implications before obtaining consent. Access to the data should be limited to authorized personnel and the storage and transfer of this data should be secured. The data samples should be inclusive and representative of the composition of communities; especially with regards to minority, marginalized and at-risk groups. Feedback mechanisms should be clear and accessible for community members to articulate their perspectives, which should be respected.

Engagement with Technology

The use and benefits of the data should be clearly communicated, and the actual benefits made available to the community directly. The suitability of the technology used should be acceptable to the community and their values; for example, their desire to access and interact with this technology should be considered.

Non-discrimination

Data collection practices should be clearly defined and reviewed regularly to prevent discrimination and bias. To identify, prevent and correct bias in the data collection process, measures such as training data collectors on cultural sensitivity and making algorithms transparent to review should be introduced.

Open-Source Models & Weights

An open-source approach allows researchers to inspect the models and weights, run models locally and modify these to suit their needs. This promotes collaborative innovation and allows for reproducibility of outputs which is key for explainable AI.

Appreciation for Linguistic Diversity

Kiswahili is Kenya’s national language, yet it is significantly under-represented in emerging technologies. Non-dominant indigenous languages spoken by communities-at-risk are represented even less. Oral narratives bear special mention as many indigenous languages are tonal and pitch pattern analysis technology allows for building a tonal-based corpus of these indigenous languages. Using Natural Language Processing for morphological analysis and to identify syntactical patterns in oral narratives, these languages can be preserved and transmitted at scale without compromising on medium and meaning. This can be used for translation of important documents and when coupled with conversational speech-to-speech AI for linguistic training. This keeps languages alive and is a powerful tool for storytelling.

Promotion of Accessibility of Cultural Knowledge

By entrenching the use of photogrammetry and 3D modelling in the cataloguing process, cultural institutions can increase accessibility to cultural sites and artefacts. With this, interactive and personalized exhibitions can be created allowing cultural institutions to reach new audiences in immersive ways. The catalogues can be made available in different languages which enhances domestic and international cultural tourism. We cannot right the wrongs of the past, but we can learn from them. Our stories must be remembered correctly to be told truly. We are not their stories about us. We are our stories.

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Should I be afraid of Artificial Intelligence as a content creator?

Esther Kiragu

Creatives like me are not only navigating an overload of information but also need to maintain interest, speed, accuracy, and relevance in our content. This is where AI comes in to help us.

I remember the day I first saw an AI-generated image that looked so realistic it was difficult to distinguish it from a photograph. We had endless conversations about it in a professional WhatsApp Group. That moment sparked my curiosity about the impact of AI on content creation. I tried out ChatGPT (an AI chatbot) and had a mix of excitement and astonishment. Seeing how ChatGPT understood my questions and gave insightful responses was surprising. It felt like I was chatting with a super-smart friend who could get me. I also felt scared. I questioned if AI would eventually replace my creative skills, a common concern among creators.

As a journalist, writer, and editor, this experience sparked my curiosity to explore the world of Artificial Intelligence more. Over time, I learnt of other AI platforms, like Gemini, that are great at brainstorming and, to some extent, making research more efficient. Recently, I designed a newsletter and poster using Canva- and no, I haven't been to any Graphic design school.

If ChatGPT can write poems and craft video scripts, Gemini can help with research, and Canva can help you design newsletters, what else is AI capable of? More importantly, how would this impact my work as a storyteller? Tag along with me as I explore if content creators have a reason to be afraid of AI.

The Rise of AI in Content Creation

The digital age has transformed the global media landscape, presenting enormous opportunities and additional challenges for content creators. Today, anyone can be a content creator thanks to digital tools. But with no gatekeepers, and the constant need for engagement, this is a double-edged sword on content quality and accuracy. Creatives like me are not only navigating an overload of information but also need to maintain interest, speed, accuracy, and relevance in our content. This is where AI comes in to help us. AI is all about making machines smart like humans. It's about giving computers the power to think, learn, solve problems, and make decisions. AI systems do this by analysing data, identifying patterns and generating insights or taking actions based on that analysis. AI is transforming content creation, marking a new era of storytelling and artistic expression, and this is how:

AI-powered personalisation

AI enables personalised content creation by tailoring content to individual preferences and behaviour, delivering more relevant and appealing experiences across various industries, such as entertainment. Streaming platforms like Netflix analyse user viewing history, preferences, and demographic data to generate personalised recommendations, enhancing user satisfaction and prolonging engagement. Similarly, AI-driven online advertisements on platforms like Google Ads and Facebook Ads leverage user behaviour and interactions to optimise Ad placements, therefore increasing Ad relevance.

AI in music

AI-powered music streaming services like Spotify utilise machine learning to create custom playlists based on user listening habits and genre preferences, offering a seamless and enjoyable music discovery experience.

AI-generated content and creative exploration

AI tools empower content creators to explore new creative possibilities and collaborate with intelligent systems, as evident in the emergence of AI-generated podcasts, photos and videos. Machine learning algorithms synthesise human-like voices and produce engaging multimedia content, ranging from conversational storytelling to informative discussions.

By integrating AI into content production, content creators enhance efficiency, experiment with innovative formats, and reach more audiences. An example of African Content creators who have adopted AI is Fallohide. This is a Kenyan Extended Reality Creative Studio that creates corporate Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, Mixed Reality solutions and immersive narratives. They create original African realities that are true to the African people and their labours. They also work with global creators to promote Afro-centric storytelling, provide African producers with a worldwide audience, and develop culturally diverse, multinational immersive media that extends beyond the continent.

Despite AI's impressive capabilities, it still faces significant limitations. AI is a tool and therefore it lacks human creativity, cultural sensitivity, nuanced understanding, commonsense reasoning, and emotional intelligence. This can lead to errors and biases. There are also concerns about ethical implications and the potential for misuse, such as the use of deep fakes. People have spread misinformation and fake news by using deep fakes to create realistic but fake videos that harm reputations or spread lies. In addition, they have enabled scams and fraud by impersonating individuals to steal money or data, and some individuals have used them as weapons for cyberbullying and harassment.

Challenges of AI in Content Creation

Algorithmic bias

Using AI in content creation and culture isn't always easy. There are challenges we need to think about carefully. One big issue is the inherent algorithmic bias in AI systems. These systems learn from historical data, which can reinforce unfair stereotypes or societal biases in what they recommend or show us. Overcoming algorithmic bias requires ongoing monitoring and evaluation, transparency, and efforts to diversify AI development teams to mitigate biases embedded in data. Other observers have talked about diversifying pools of data being fed into systems that AI picks from. That way societies, communities, individuals, etc are represented and the AI promote can provide answers or suggestions that reflect the human diversity.

Maintaining quality and human touch

Another challenge is keeping AI-generated content top-notch. While AI can churn out content efficiently, it often lacks that human touch and nuanced creativity. This affects how people emotionally connect with the content and its overall artistic integrity. Ensuring that AI-made content meets quality standards and resonates with audiences remains a big hurdle for achieving emotional connection and acceptance by audiences.

Privacy concerns

Privacy worries have also come up because AI relies heavily on user historical data for personalisation. Some users feel uneasy about how much AI systems analyse and use their personal information to tailor content. These concerns are valid, especially considering the risks if this data falls into the wrong hands. For example, one of the most concerning uses of AI in content creation is the creation of deep fake videos. Deep fake technology uses AI algorithms to manipulate videos or images to make it appear that someone said or did something they did not. This has been misused for spreading false information, defaming individuals, or creating misleading content. Finding the right balance between personalisation and privacy is important for creators to maintain trust and comply with the evolving data privacy rules. Kenya is on the right track with the Data Protection Act of 2019, which governs how we should handle and use individuals' data.

Ethical dilemmas

Ethical content creation faces the persistent challenge of combating misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation refers to false information shared without harmful intent, while disinformation involves deliberately disseminating false information to deceive or manipulate audiences. Content creators must uphold accuracy and truth, particularly when leveraging AI-driven tools. With AI's increasing capacity, there is a heightened responsibility for verifying sources, fact-checking information, and countering the spread of misinformation.

AI tools can help identify patterns of misinformation and disinformation by analysing content across digital platforms. However, ethical considerations arise too in disclosing AI-generated content to ensure transparency and build trust with audiences. Content creators and policymakers must navigate these ethical complexities to ensure responsible AI integration in cultural production, safeguarding against the unintended amplification of misinformation and disinformation within digital media environments.

By prioritising accuracy, transparency, and accountability in AI-driven content creation, content creators and policymakers contribute to a more trustworthy and credible ecosystem, mitigating the harmful impact of misinformation and disinformation on societal discourse.

AI in Content Creation: A Personal Perspective

As a journalist, writer, and editor, I've seen firsthand how AI-generated content has both advantages and drawbacks in my work environment. On the positive side, AI has significantly improved my efficiency and productivity. I generate ideas and brainstorm new story topics, angles and keywords to use in content. I also come up with drafts for articles, blog posts and social media captions quickly, saving me time and effort. AI helps me in content optimisation by analysing the content and suggesting improvements for Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), readability, and audience engagement. Additionally, AI has opened up new opportunities for me to deliver the same content in different formats, including text to audio, text to video, text to audio and text to Image, enabling me to reach a diverse audience.

However, it hasn't been all rosy. I've also encountered some challenges with AI-generated content. One of the biggest issues is the lack of originality. AI tools often produce content that is generic and lacks a unique voice. I can easily find to my horror that me and a colleague have posted the same content word for word! To get around this, I always edit and add my personal touch to AI-generated content.

Another challenge is the potential for inaccuracies and biases. While AI tools have access to vast datasets, they don't always provide accurate or unbiased information. Therefore, one must carefully review and edit AI-generated content to ensure its quality and reliability. Ultimately, AI is a valuable tool for content creators like me. When used effectively, it enhances productivity, creativity, and audience reach. However, it's important to be aware of its limitations and use it as a complement to human expertise, rather than a replacement.

Policy and Regulation

Policy plays a key role in shaping the landscape of AI-generated content. Keeping up with the rapid pace of AI development and understanding its intricate nature makes developing and implementing effective, up-to-date policies complex. Policies can act as a guideline, but they must be reviewed and updated constantly.

Kenya is establishing AI-specific regulations focusing on algorithmic transparency, data protection, and accountability in AI-driven applications. It's all about creating an environment where AI can thrive while upholding ethical standards and societal impact. But

To ensure that everyone benefits from the digital revolution, there is a need to invest in digital infrastructure to improve internet connectivity and access to technology, especially in underserved regions. This means expanding broadband networks, supporting digital literacy programs, and reducing barriers to online participation!

it doesn't stop there. Investing in digital infrastructure and capacity-building initiatives is key to equipping our workforce with the skills to leverage AI effectively. To ensure that everyone benefits from the digital revolution, there is a need to invest in digital infrastructure to improve internet connectivity and access to technology, especially in underserved regions. This means expanding broadband networks, supporting digital literacy programs, and reducing barriers to online participation! Kenya can harness AI's potential to drive economic growth, improve public services, and promote inclusive development across various sectors by fostering collaboration between the public and private sectors.

Policymakers in Kenya are taking proactive measures to address the challenges and opportunities AI presents in the digital age. Recognising AI's transformative potential, the Kenyan government, alongside other African nations, is actively formulating policies aimed at fostering innovation while ensuring ethical and regulatory considerations.

The Rwanda National AI Policy was officially adopted in April 2023. This milestone positions Rwanda as a leader in AI adoption and development within Africa. It heavily invests in public service digitisation, appointing Chief Digital Officers in every ministry to implement new laws, including the National Policy on AI. These initiatives foster 21st-century skills and AI literacy, creating an open, secure, and trusted data ecosystem that supports the AI Revolution and accelerates responsible AI adoption in the private sector. These efforts are of significant value to African content creators, providing them with a supportive environment and access to advanced technologies for more impactful and engaging content creation.

My journey of exploring Artificial Intelligence in content creation has been both thrilling and challenging for me as a storyteller. Seeing the proactive steps taken by countries like Rwanda in adopting AI policies and investing in digital infrastructure is inspiring.

So, should we be scared of AI as storytellers?

No.

It's more about seeing AI as a collaborator, a tool that can help us tell even better stories. We still have the magic – the human touch, the emotions, the experiences – that make our stories special. AI is just here to lend a hand.

So let's not get complacent.

Let's embrace AI as a storytelling partner, but use our human creativity to craft content that resonates with your audience.

The future of storytelling is ours to create, and it's looking pretty exciting!

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The Role of Video Games in Preserving Traditional African Cultures

Jay Shapiro

Introduction:

Africa is currently undergoing an unprecedented demographic phenomenon, with over 70% of the 1+ Billion population currently less than 30 years old. These digital native youth are rapidly becoming increasingly urban, educated and Westernized. As a result, generations of cultural traditions are at risk of entirely disappearing within the coming decade. The rapid pace of global digitalisation and urbanisation poses unique challenges to preserving indigenous cultures and traditions, particularly in regions as culturally rich yet dynamically changing as Africa. The allure of the urban lifestyle, coupled with the pervasive influence of Western media, has precipitated a cultural shift among the youth, steering them away from the practices and values that have defined their communities for generations.

The advent of the internet, alongside global media platforms such as Netflix and TikTok, has introduced a Western cultural narrative to African youth, creating an unprecedented competition for cultural relevance. While democratising access to information, these digital platforms also tend to homogenise cultural expressions, often at the expense of local and indigenous traditions. The situation is further exacerbated by the significant rural-to-urban migration observed in countries like Kenya, where urban centres like Nairobi offer economic opportunities not found in rural areas, yet simultaneously distancing young people from their family's cultural roots.

This generational shift in cultural affiliation and identification signals a worrying trend: the potential dilution or disappearance of indigenous traditions within a few generations. UNESCO's efforts in *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity in Cultural Expressions* (2005)¹ highlight how digital media's global reach can overshadow local cultures, gradually leading to a loss of cultural identity among indigenous populations. Similarly, Omeluzor, Saturday (2014)² study, *Preservation of African Culture in the Information Age*, examines the link between digital media, urbanisation and the erosion of cultural traditions. Through comparative case studies, Afolasade A. Adewumi (2022)³ highlights how urban life's conveniences and cosmopolitan allure often come at the cost of disconnecting individuals from their Traditional Cultural Expressions (TCE).

In the East African context, local game developers are taking this to heart. "Many aspects of our African culture are dying out. I'm looking at e-gaming as an avenue for cultural preservation. That's my motivation," reflected Anthony Okeyo, CEO of Kenya's Rubik's Digital⁴. Preserving African cultural traditions amidst modern pressures is not only a matter of cultural pride but of social cohesion and identity. Local content creators, and in particular video game developers are waking up to the urgency of documenting and integrating these traditions into the fabric of modern African society to combat the encroaching forces of cultural gentrification.

The looming possibility of losing such rich traditions within one or two generations calls for immediate and strategic interventions. These cultures' importance extends beyond mere tradition, embodying the collective memory, identity, and resilience of African communities. As such, the preservation of these traditions is not merely an act of nostalgia but a critical endeavour to maintain cultural diversity and integrity in the face of relentless modernisation and globalisation.

¹ UNESCO, *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Diversity in Cultural Expressions*, art. 1 (g), Oct. 20, 2005 available at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/cultural-diversity/2005-convention> (hereinafter UNESCO Convention).

² Omeluzor, Saturday. (2014). *Preservation of African Culture in the Information Age. Information Impact: Journal of Information and Knowledge Management*. 5. 82-90

³Afolasade A. Adewumi (2022) *Protecting intangible cultural heritage in the era of rapid technological advancement*, *International Review of Law, Computers & Technology*, 36:1, 3-16, DOI: 10.1080/13600869.2021.1997084

⁴Okwachi, D. (2023, August 10). *Online gaming and e-sport culture gains momentum in Kenya*. UN - Africa Renewal. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/august-2023/online-gaming-and-e-sport-culture-gains-momentum-kenya>

The Universality of 'Play':

Play, an activity as ancient as humanity itself, transcends cultures, ages, and geographies, manifesting the innate joy of interaction, exploration, and learning. Johan Huizinga, in his seminal work *Homo Ludens*⁵, posits that play is foundational to the development of cultures, emphasising its role not just in recreation but as a critical element in societal rituals and ceremonies, highlighting its universal nature across human societies.

From the earliest recorded history, evidence abounds of games and play-acting as a universal language among humans. Archaeological finds, from dice in Mesopotamia to Senet boards in Egypt, underscore the centrality of play in ancient societies. Brian Sutton-Smith, in *The Ambiguity of Play*⁶, further explores this concept, illustrating how play's various forms and functions have evolved but always remained a constant presence in human life, underscoring its universality and significance throughout history. The "*Open Digital Library on Traditional Games*"⁷ is a project initiated by UNESCO in 2015, to document indigenous games from around the world, and digitize them for the main purpose of preservation.

Cross-cultural examples of play reinforce its omnipresence and versatility. In Africa, Mancala games played with seeds and shallow holes dug in the earth, are not merely games but serve as a vehicle for social interaction, education, and the transmission of cultural values. Such games, deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, highlight play's role in fostering community cohesion and intergenerational bonding.

In contemporary times, the essence of play remains unchanged, though its forms may evolve. From children playing tag in schoolyards to adults engaging in card games or digital entertainment, the fundamental drive to play persists. As discussed in RM Holmes' *Children's Play and Culture*⁸, modern research emphasises play's critical role in cognitive development and learning of one's own culture, evidencing its enduring relevance.

The digital age has expanded the play domain into virtual spaces, with video games becoming a prominent form of entertainment and social interaction. Titles ranging from Candy Crush to Call of Duty exemplify the broad spectrum of contemporary digital play, engaging diverse demographics across the globe. What is inspiring now is the amount of introspection happening across the game development industry, relating to its own responsibilities and roles in shaping / preserving cultures. In his excellent essay: *Decolonizing Play*⁹, Aaron Trammell writes: "Postcolonial game studies looks at how games represent colonial and postcolonial environments in the story worlds they present, and also considers how these games are consumed by players in postcolonial nations. Fittingly, it is a critique both of how games reproduce colonial tropes."

"Play" bridges generations and cultures in its myriad forms, illustrating its universality and adaptability. It continues to serve as a medium for learning, socialisation, and cultural expression, reflecting the dynamics of human societies. As play evolves, it remains a mirror to the cultural, technological, and social shifts, underscoring the need to understand and embrace its role in human development and cultural preservation. However, those who create the games (i.e. Game Developers) have an inherent responsibility to do so with the recognition of the impact of the stories they tell.

The Role of Games In Traditional African Culture

Mancala: Mancala is not a single game but a category of strategy games that involve moving seeds, beans, or stones among a series of pits or holes on a board. The objective varies among versions but generally involves capturing more pieces than one's opponent. With its diverse



This is a character designed by Usiku Games for our game called "Maasai M'kali"

⁵Huizinga, J. (2016). *Homo ludens*. Angelico Press.

⁶Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard University Press

⁷UNESCO (n.d.). *Open Digital Library on Traditional Games. Traditional Games are Transformed Into Electronic Games*. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from Open Digital Library on Traditional Games

⁸Holmes, R. M. (2013). *Children's play and culture*. Scholarpedia, 8(6), 31016.

⁹Aaron Trammell (2022) *Decolonizing play*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 39:3, 239-246, DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2022.2080844

cultures and histories, Africa is home to several variations of Mancala, reflecting its deep-rooted significance across the region. In West Africa, the game is known as Oware, Warri, Awale, and Awele. In Angola, it is called Kiela. Below are some of the more common African variants.

- **Bao:** Particularly prominent in Tanzania and parts of Kenya, Bao is known for its complex strategy and is considered by many to be one of the most sophisticated Mancala variants. The game is played on a wooden board with four rows of eight pits. The rules of Bao, especially in its Swahili version, are intricate, demanding strategic foresight and critical thinking.
- **Ajua (Ayoayo):** This version is popular in Uganda and among the Yoruba people. Playing on a board with two rows of six holes, Ajua involves a more straightforward set of rules than Bao but still requires strategic planning and insight. The game's simplicity makes it accessible to a wide age range, promoting social interaction and strategic thinking.
- **Kigogo:** Found in Tanzania, Kigogo shares similarities with other Mancala games but with localised rules and board designs. Like its counterparts, Kigogo is played on a board carved from wood, with pits for the seeds. The game serves not only as entertainment but also as a means of teaching mathematics and strategy to children.
- **Gebeta:** Ethiopia's version of the ancient game Mancala stands as a vibrant thread in the fabric of Ethiopian cultural traditions, showcasing the country's intellectual and social heritage. Played on a wooden board with rows of pits, participants strategically move seeds, beans, or stones, aiming to outmanoeuvre their opponent. While Gebeta shares the core premise of seed distribution and capture with its counterparts like Bao in Kenya, Ajua in Uganda, and Kigogo in Tanzania, it distinguishes itself through unique gameplay strategies and board design. Unlike Bao, which is known for its complex strategic depth and four rows of pits, Gebeta, like Ajua and Kigogo, utilises a simpler two-row format, making it accessible yet still challenging. This simplicity fosters a different layer of strategic play, distinct from the intricate tactics required in Bao. Furthermore, while Ajua and Kigogo emphasise local variations and cultural nuances, Gebeta's version embodies Ethiopian communal values, weaving together generations in a game of intellect and foresight. Through these subtle differences and similarities, Gebeta enriches Ethiopia's cultural landscape and connects it to a broader African tradition of Mancala games, highlighting the region's rich diversity and shared heritage in traditional games.



These are characters designed by Usiku Games for our game call ed "Cyber Sojas"

CONTEMPORARY GAME EXAMPLE:

“Gebeta” by Qene Games¹⁰ from Ethiopia

Gebeta is a mobile casual game produced by Qene Games in Addis Ababa and published by Carry1st worldwide. It takes the traditional elements of the Ethiopian version of the famous Mancala board game and adds modern, engaging digital elements, including a storyline, computer-based opponents, power-ups, and player progression. Through these contemporary elements, Qene and Carry1st are bringing this centuries old traditional African game to a whole new generation, worldwide, many of whom may have never heard of Mancala.

Dhow Racing, a captivating aspect of Swahili culture, has its roots deeply embedded in the history of East Africa's coastal communities. Originating from a time when dhows, the traditional sailing vessels of the Indian Ocean, were primarily used for trade, fishing, and transportation across the Swahili Coast, these races have evolved into a celebrated cultural tradition. The construction of dhows, a craft passed down through generations, speaks to the ingenuity and maritime prowess of the Swahili people. Today, dhow racing is a vibrant and competitive sport, especially notable in areas like Kilifi Creek in Kenya, where the serene waters become arenas for spirited competition. Here, local communities gather to celebrate their maritime heritage, with races often coinciding with festivals and significant cultural events. These competitions are not merely displays of sailing skill but also communal gatherings that reinforce social bonds, pass down seafaring knowledge, and keep the rich maritime traditions of the Swahili coast alive. Across the East African littoral, from the shores of Tanzania to the islands of Zanzibar and beyond, dhow racing continues to be a poignant symbol of cultural identity and endurance, bridging the past with the present in the rhythmic dance of sails against the horizon.

CONTEMPORARY GAME EXAMPLE:

“Sweave” created by Leti Arts¹¹ in Ghana

Sweave is what is referred to as a “Hypercasual”¹² mobile game. It is designed for bite-sized entertainment during idle in-between moments during the players’ day. The gameplay is timing-based, testing the players’ reflexes, agility and puzzle-solving skills. The background environments in Sweave use the West African “Adinkra” patterns originating from the Ashanti Empire¹³, which thrived in the 1700s in the area covered by Ghana, Cote d’Ivoire and Togo. By combining the modern hypercasual gameplay with the Adinkra textures, Sweave carefully merges the ancient and the contemporary, introducing a new generation to these West African traditions and firmly planting the game as an indigenous success from the continent. Through the game, thousands of players from around the world may be introduced for the first time to the rich history of the Ashanti Empire, which had far-reaching political implications, including the slave trade to America and establishing the substantial gold and ivory trading relations as far away as Portugal and the United Kingdom (who eventually defeated them.)

¹⁰(2024, March 27). Gebeta. Qene Games - Ethiopia. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://qenetech.com/games/gebta/>

¹¹Leti Arts - Ghana (2024, February 21). Sweave. Google Play Store. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.letiarts.sweave>

¹²Hypercasual Games. (2024, March 30). In Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypercasual_game

¹³Ashanti Empire. (2024, March 30). In Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashanti_Empire



This is a screenshot of the game called “Sweave”, created by Leti Arts in Accra, Ghana.

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¹⁸Jason J. Mulikita, UN Youth Envoy (2022, February 23). Young People’s Potential, the Key to Africa’s Sustainable Development. United Nations. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://www.un.org/ohrls/news/young-people%E2%80%99s-potential-key-africa%E2%80%99s-sustainable-development>

¹⁹(2023, July 18). Number of smartphone subscriptions in Sub-Saharan Africa from 2011 to 2028(in millions). Statista. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1133777/sub-saharan-africa-smartphone-subscriptions/>

Marbles: Across East Africa and the broader African continent, the tradition of playing with marbles unites children in a shared experience of joy, strategy, and skill. This timeless game played with small glass spheres, assumes various names and adopts different rules from country to country, reflecting the rich diversity of play across cultures. In Kenya, the game known as “Bano” involves players aiming to knock marbles out of a drawn circle in the dirt, a test of precision and tactics. In contrast, South Africa’s “Kgati” sees marbles being used in more complex play patterns, incorporating elements of local folklore into the game’s strategy. Nigeria’s “Zinchi” introduces team play aspects, where players work together to achieve common goals, differing from Bano’s individualistic approach. Over in Egypt, the game “Mancala” uses marbles in a board set-up, showcasing a blend of traditional board game strategy with the physical skill of marble play. Lastly, “Golo” in Ghana emphasises distance shooting and marble exchanges, offering a unique variation on the concept of territory and ownership seen in Bano. Each of these games, from “Bano” in Kenya to “Golo” in Ghana, not only entertains but also educates, cultivating skills and fostering community among players while highlighting the universal appeal of marbles as a conduit for cultural expression and connection.

CONTEMPORARY GAME EXAMPLE:

“Bano” by Usiku Games in Kenya, and Kayfo Games in Senegal

Bano takes the traditional and almost universal game of marbles and brings it into an Afro-Futurism world, where the patch of dirt and a hand-drawn circle have been swapped for modern animated obstacles. This exciting and more challenging game brings together the schoolyard traditional game that is so familiar with a fun science fiction high-stakes competition. This combination will bring a new generation, typically glued to their devices, and introduce the social competition elements that have built up a sense of community through Bano throughout history.

Video Games in Contemporary African Culture

The video games industry in Africa is witnessing an unprecedented boom, fuelled by a vibrant youth population and rapidly advancing digital connectivity. From its nascent stages about a decade ago, with pioneers like Leti Arts¹⁴ in Ghana laying the groundwork, the industry has evolved into a dynamic and flourishing sector. Today, many of the continent’s leading game studios have united under the banner of the Pan Africa Gaming Group (PAGG)¹⁵, signalling a new era of collaboration and innovation in African video game development¹⁶. With their efforts combined, the local industry in Africa is set to cross USD \$1 Billion for the first time in 2024¹⁷.

A key driver of this remarkable growth is Africa’s massive youth demographic. With over 1 billion young people, the continent boasts a significant portion (70%) of its population below the age of 30¹⁸, a demographic bulge that presents both challenges and opportunities. This youthful dynamism, combined with an entrepreneurial spirit, propels various sectors, including the video gaming industry, into new heights of creativity and market reach. The World Bank highlights the potential of this demographic trend, noting that Africa’s youth are not just the future but also the continent’s present, embodying a crucial market and talent pool for the burgeoning gaming sector.

The connectivity of Africa’s youth is another cornerstone of the gaming industry’s growth. With over 500 million smartphones¹⁹, Africa’s mobile connectivity surpasses that of the

United States, Canada, and Mexico combined, illustrating the continent’s rapid adoption of digital technology. This proliferation of smartphones is a testament to the continent’s digital revolution and serves as the primary platform for video gaming in Africa. A report by GSMA indicates that 4G connectivity on the continent is set to double in the next 5 years²⁰, further underlining the potential for mobile gaming to continue growing as a dominant form of entertainment and engagement for African youths. A recent report by PAGG and GeoPoll found that 92% of the 2,500 respondents in Nigeria, Egypt, South Africa and Kenya, preferred playing games on their mobile devices, with over half of the respondents value cultural relevance in games, and a substantial 44% feel there are not enough games with characters that look like them or environments similar to their life²¹.

The gaming industry in Africa is uniquely positioned to leverage this digital and demographic landscape to entertain, preserve, and celebrate the continent’s rich cultural heritage. Studios across Africa are increasingly exploring how to create modern digital versions of traditional African games, offering a bridge between generations and a medium through which the stories, values, and traditions of various tribes can be shared and preserved. This initiative ensures that traditional African games do not fade into obscurity and introduces them to global audiences, showcasing the diversity and richness of African cultures.

CONTEMPORARY GAME EXAMPLE:

“Disney Iwájú: Rising Chef ”²² by Maliyo Games / Disney Plus in Nigeria

Working together with African origin animation house Kugali, Disney launched the Iwájú animated series on Disney Plus. Taking place in a dystopian near-future Lagos, there is a distinctly African feel to the story and environments. Maliyo Games was tapped by Disney to turn that fictional afro-futuristic world into a playable mobile game that also leaned heavily on Nigeria’s rich cultural heritage. The resulting game: “Rising Chef” borrows the characters and environments from the TV Show, but integrates traditional West African cuisine like Jollof Rice. This fast-paced game has all the modern elements of tension, time pressure and strategy, without the player even thinking about the fact that they are fundamentally preparing generations old traditional Nigerian recipes.



This is a screenshot of the game called “Disney Iwájú: Rising Chef ” by Maliyo Games / Disney Plus in Lagos, Nigeria

²⁰(n.d.). *The Mobile Economy Sub-Saharan Africa 2023*. GSMA. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-economy/sub-saharan-africa/>

²¹PAGG and GeoPoll (2024, March 25). *Gaming in Africa 2024*. Geopoll. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://www.geopoll.com/blog/gaming-in-africa-2024/>

²²Maliyo Games (2024, February 21). *Disney Iwájú: Rising Chef*. Google Play Store. Retrieved March 30, 2024, from <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.disney.jollofkitchen&hl=en&gl=US>

The urgent need for significant funding towards the protection of traditional games

In the face of rapidly disappearing traditional cultures, the critical role of modern video games in preserving these cultural heritages cannot be overstated. With traditional African games teetering on the brink of oblivion within a generation, there is an urgent call for donors, government development agencies and impact investors to amplify their funding for projects to create digital versions of these games. This necessity is underscored by UNESCO's commendable efforts to catalogue and safeguard traditional African games, a testament to the global recognition of their cultural value and the imminent risk of their loss. Moreover, the involvement of commercial giants like Disney Plus and Carry1st in funding the production of digital renditions of traditional games highlights the potential for a synergistic partnership between cultural preservation initiatives and the gaming industry. These collaborations ensure the financial viability of such projects and facilitate their access to a global audience, amplifying their impact. By investing in the digital preservation of traditional games, civil society organisations can play a pivotal role in bridging generations, ensuring that the rich tapestry of African cultural history is remembered and actively engaged with by younger generations. This, in turn, fosters a deeper connection with cultural roots, leveraging the universal language of gaming to keep alive the stories, values, and traditions that define various African communities. The time to act is now, as the window for safeguarding these cultural treasures narrows, increasing funding and support for these initiatives more critical than ever.

Conclusion

Indigenous video game development offers a groundbreaking avenue for safeguarding Africa's rich cultural heritage against the encroaching tide of gentrification, globalisation and digital homogenisation. The examples shared above, both historical and contemporary, have illuminated the pivotal role of innovative technologies and collaborative efforts in transforming traditional games into digital experiences that resonate across generations. With the support of development organisations like UNESCO as well as partnerships with commercial players such as Disney Plus and Carry1st, we are witnessing a renaissance in cultural preservation efforts through gaming. Nevertheless, the urgency for increased funding and broader engagement from civil society cannot be overstated. As we stand at a critical juncture, preserving these ingrained cultural traditions in the modern digital realm presents a challenge and an imperative for ensuring that the vibrant tapestry of African traditions continues to enrich our global heritage. Through organizations like Games For Change, and Playing For The Planet, let us celebrate those game developers and funders who remain committed to embracing the symbiosis of tradition and technology to foster a future where cultural identities are not merely remembered but actively shared between friends in fun and engaging modern video games.

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The Intersection of Artificial Intelligence and African Art: Navigating Innovation, Ethics, and Cultural Representation

Esther Gicheru

In recent years, the East African region has witnessed a remarkable surge in the adoption and incorporation of digital and Artificial Intelligence technologies within its vibrant arts and cultural landscape. The advent of the digital age has brought about a profound shift in the art world, encompassing various aspects such as the conversion of cultural archives into digital archives, the emergence of virtual galleries, and the creation of immersive augmented reality experiences. The rise of AI art, or generative AI, has significantly transformed the landscape of creative expression by offering individuals the ability to produce diverse art forms using artificial intelligence technology, thereby changing consumption and perception of art. Unlike traditional digital art, which requires creative skills, AI art enables even those with minimal creative ability to generate unlimited artwork based on a text prompt.

The origins of AI art may be traced back to 1973 when Harold Cohen pioneered the development of the first documented AI art production programme, known as AARON. Yet, it was not until the emergence of Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs) in 2014 that artificial intelligence (AI) art experienced notable progress. Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), which include a generator and a discriminator, have a pivotal function in producing lifelike images, music, and text by generating new data and differentiating between authentic and counterfeit material. The generator is responsible for creating new content, such as images or text, while the discriminator's role is to distinguish between real and generated data, determining whether the content appears authentic or not (Pra, 2023). In 2021, OpenAI unveiled DALL-E, an innovative text-to-image program that was trained on a vast dataset consisting of millions of images and concepts (McLean, 2023). This development represented a major milestone in the field of AI text-to-image technology. Since then, there has been a rapid increase in the number of AI art generators (Carmen Gueez, n.d.).

This growth is primarily due to open-source developers that are using different technologies to create new platforms such as Midjourney, Leonardo AI etc. These AI art generators function by leveraging extensive datasets of images and texts from the open web. Subsequently, the app algorithms are trained to discern patterns and correlations within these images, enabling them to generate new ones in a similar style. By leveraging this extensive dataset and employing advanced algorithms, these applications can produce unique and diverse visual outputs that reflect the patterns and characteristics observed in the training data.

However, amidst these technological advancements, concerns have emerged within the artistic and advertising communities in East Africa. As companies increasingly turn to AI to cut production and advertising costs, there is apprehension about the potential repercussions. Artists and advertising agencies fear a decline in income and potential job losses if AI becomes proficient enough to replace their traditional roles.

These concerns are further compounded by the observation that DALL-E and similar AI art generators have been discovered to propagate racial prejudices in the artwork they create (Cheong et al., 2024). In addition, AI-generated art, although innovative and easily accessible, often lacks the emotional depth and personal touch inherent in traditional art forms. Artists, who draw inspiration from their own experiences and emotions, fear that the authenticity and genuine human expression found in their work may be undermined by AI-generated creations.

Adding to these concerns is the fact that African AI tools, such as UlizaLLama (AskLLama) by Jacaranda Health, Lelapa AI in South Africa, and Nigeria's multilingual large language model (LLM), are currently focused on text generation rather than text-to-image creation (Adebayo et al., 2024). This limitation further reinforces the racial biases and lack of representation of African art within the broader AI landscape. The absence of regionally developed text-to-image AI models means that the rich diversity and cultural significance of African art continue to be underrepresented or misrepresented in global AI art narrative, perpetuating a cycle where African voices and artistic expressions remain marginalized. As Talu (2023) argues, if these issues are left unchecked, there is a risk of reinforcing harmful stereotypes, eroding the essence of human expression and creativity, and diminishing the value of artistic endeavors in the face of technological advancement.

AI advertising in Kenya

In Kenya, the impact of AI is becoming increasingly visible in advertising. In August 2023, East Africa's telecom giant and Kenya's biggest advertiser, Safaricom, introduced what it touts as Africa's first AI-generated TV ad. Since then, the company has extended its AI-driven campaigns across various platforms. The company has created both print and motion advertisements using AI, which have become popular among Kenyan consumers. Speaking at the 2023 World Internet Conference in Wuzhen, China, Safaricom's director of brand and marketing, Zizwe Awuor Vundla highlighted how AI has enabled the company to achieve creative excellence and marketing effectiveness. She pointed to innovations such as the Zuri chatbot and the AI-generated TV commercial for the fourth edition of the Safaricom Chapa Dimba football tournament as prime examples of this success. Zizwe expressed excitement about the transformation AI brings and its potential to change the conversation around AI for good (Safaricom newsroom, 2023; Xinhua, 2024).



Another memorable example of an AI-generated ad is a billboard in Nairobi featuring a mother joyfully chasing her baby, as he races away with a massive loaf of bread. This image, promoting Supa Loaf, a local bread brand, generated significant buzz both online and offline in early January 2024. This use of AI in advertising is on the uptake, as government agencies are also joining the trend. Recently, the Kenya Urban Roads Authority (KURA) unveiled an AI-generated commercial highlighting the advancements made in developing roads throughout towns and cities. The advertisement highlighted the transforming power of urban transportation and their dedication to seamless connection throughout all 47 counties in Kenya.

Speaking on his podcast, Pure Digital Passion, Moses Kemibaro, the Founder and CEO of Dotsavvy, one of Kenya's leading Digital Agencies in Kenya, characterized the current state of AI in the country as a "wild wild west" moment, as the country is in the process of developing guidelines and legislation for the use of the technology. He pointed out concerns related to intellectual property rights and the potential job losses for creatives like photographers, videographers, and models. However, he acknowledged that the adoption of AI in marketing is inevitable, urging everyone to adapt to this technological wave or risk being left behind (Kemibaro, 2024). One group of people worried about Kenya's increasing usage of generative AI is videographers employed by advertising agencies. These creatives fear that AI is encroaching on their livelihood, potentially rendering traditional cameras obsolete. However, they recognize the necessity to adapt and learn how to create AI-generated videos to stay relevant in the industry as companies are working to trim their marketing and ad budgets by replacing creatives with AI to navigate a challenging 2024 amid economic hardships.

Proposed to control the fast-expanding sector is the Kenya Robotics and Artificial Intelligence Society Bill, 2023. The legislation seeks to advance the ethical and responsible use of AI technology in the nation (Wee Tracker, 2024). However, the Bill has been met with strong opposition from the tech community, which sees it as an attempt to create unnecessary bureaucracy and control rather than fostering innovation and growth. Critics argue that the bill conflates distinct fields of "Robotics" and "Artificial Intelligence" lacks the necessary expertise for effective regulation, and introduces burdensome bureaucracy that could stifle innovation and drive talent away. They contend that the bill is more about creating positions of power than fostering growth, criticizing its absence of a clear national AI strategy and its potential to isolate Kenya from the global AI community. Instead of imposing restrictive measures, the community advocates for a focus on building local talent, attracting investment, and creating an environment that encourages AI innovation and positions Kenya as a leader in the global AI economy.

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Who has legitimate ownership of AI-generated art: the algorithm developer or the machine?

Another pressing issue for artists in this region concerns the ability to copyright artwork created with AI generators. In a landmark decision by the US Copyright Office (USCO) regarding the comic book "Zarya of the Dawn" by Kris Kashtanova in March 2023, it was determined that AI-generated images are not eligible for copyright protection. Kashtanova used the AI image generator Midjourney to create the comic book. Although the United States Copyright Office acknowledged Kashtanova as the author of the text and the arrangement of the book's components, it declined to recognize her as the author of the individual images, or panels comprising Zarya (Sans, 2023). Despite this verdict, there are still opportunities to protect certain elements of the work, such as the arrangement of images and the addition of text. Although the images themselves were considered ineligible for copyright, Kashtanova's arrangement of these images and the incorporation of text were eligible for copyright protection. This case highlights challenges to traditional concepts of authorship and raises significant moral concerns about the nature of art creation. Addressing these issues necessitates a thorough examination of the legal frameworks surrounding AI-generated artwork and the importance of creating and understanding copyright laws and regulations tailored to safeguard artists in the digital art domain.

Another challenge facing the East Africa digital artscape is the proliferation of unregulated content and the potential for misinformation to spread rapidly across digital platforms. In this region where social media usage is widespread, false information can have significant socio-economic consequences, ranging from inciting violence to undermining public trust in institutions. As such, content creators and digital platforms alike must prioritize accuracy, integrity, and transparency in their work.

The spread of fake news and biases

The proliferation of AI-powered technologies, especially in the domain of social media and political campaigning, has intensified concerns regarding misinformation, hate speech, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. As a result, it presents substantial risks to individuals, institutions, and countries. Automated accounts, commonly referred to as ‘bots,’ have been used to distribute skewed news and propaganda on platforms such as X (formerly Twitter). During pivotal political events, these bots have been a major influence on public opinion. In East Africa, automated accounts, or ‘bots,’ have also been observed influencing public opinion and disseminating propaganda on social media platforms. For instance, during election periods in countries like Kenya and Uganda, there have been reports of bots spreading biased information and propaganda to manipulate voter sentiment. These bots have been used to amplify certain political narratives, target specific demographics, and create the illusion of widespread support for particular candidates or parties. By leveraging social media platforms, these bots have the potential to sway public opinion and impact electoral outcomes, posing significant challenges to the integrity of democratic processes in the region.

Research has shown that algorithmic news recommendations significantly influence the creation of “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” (Arguedas et al., 2022). Such occurrences reduce the exposure of individuals to a wide range of opinions, resulting in increased societal polarization. Given AI’s ever-changing nature and expanding relevance, overcoming these issues is vital to defending democratic norms and fostering informed civic participation.

Moreover, the prevalence of ‘cyber troops’(actors affiliated with governments or political parties who are tasked with influencing public opinion on the internet) in various countries, including both authoritarian regimes and democracies, highlights the global scale of social media manipulation efforts (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). These tactics, according to research by the European Parliamentary Research Service, Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA), involve the use of bots and coordinated campaigns to spread spam, fake news, and biased content, amplifying certain narratives and stifling dissenting voices (Europäisches Parlament / Referat Wissenschaftliche Vorausschau, 2020). This can lead to significant socio-economic consequences such as inciting violence and undermining public trust in institutions. As such, content creators and digital platforms alike must prioritize accuracy, integrity, and transparency in their work.

In addition, the use of AI technologies to specifically profile voters on social media platforms has raised concerns regarding the potential manipulation of electoral results and the erosion of democratic election integrity. Research has shown that algorithmic news recommendations significantly influence the creation of “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” (Arguedas et al., 2022). Such occurrences reduce the exposure of individuals to a wide range of opinions, resulting in increased societal polarization. Given AI’s ever-changing nature and expanding relevance, overcoming these issues is vital to defending democratic norms and fostering informed civic participation.

Cultural appropriation and representation

The discussion on the intersection between AI and cultural appropriation necessitates a thorough understanding of the fundamental concepts at play. The concept of cultural appropriation revolves around the act of adopting elements from a culture without demonstrating a thorough understanding or giving proper acknowledgment to the said culture. On the other hand, cultural representation pertains to the manner in which meaning is formulated and transmitted through diverse mediums of media and communication (Management, 2023). It explores the intricate mechanisms by which individuals and groups are represented, depicted, or symbolically conveyed in various cultural texts and practices.

According to Scispace (2023), the concept of representation holds significant importance as it plays a crucial role in shaping our comprehension of social identities, power dynamics, and cultural meanings.

AI has a significant influence on the representation of various cultures, as it is instrumental in determining their portrayal and consumption. Although it has the ability to increase diversity and provide exposure to other cultural expressions, there are legitimate worries about commercialization and misrepresentation. The use of AI-generated content has the potential to reinforce power dynamics and cultural appropriation, leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes and the distortion of cultural authenticity.

The limited representation of Africa in AI, particularly regarding language diversity and cultural inclusion, is deeply rooted in the fact that most AI algorithms are developed and trained outside of Africa. These algorithms often rely on datasets that overlook or exhibit bias against significant portions of the African population (Ndour, 2022). Although global platforms like Google have made some progress by incorporating languages such as Swahili into their AI systems, many African dialects remain underrepresented in OpenAI's ChatGPT.

The absence of regionally developed text-to-image AI models further exacerbates the problem of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of African cultures, languages, and artistic expressions. This not only perpetuates the dominance of Western cultural norms in AI-generated art, which may inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or fail to accurately depict the rich diversity of African cultures but also limits the accessibility and relevance of these tools for African users. Without localized AI models that understand and generate content in African languages, there is a risk that these technologies will continue to be seen as foreign or disconnected from the lived realities of people in Africa. This disconnect can contribute to the digital divide, where African populations are left out of the benefits of AI advancements or are forced to adapt to tools that do not fully cater to their cultural and linguistic needs.

The United Nations' AI Advisory Board acknowledges this disparity and emphasizes the importance of ensuring equitable access to AI benefits, especially for regions like Africa (Naliaka, 2024). To address this, collaboration with local communities and experts is essential to collect and digitize data representing African languages and cultures. Additionally, fostering diversity within AI development teams and promoting cultural inclusivity are crucial steps towards achieving a more representative AI landscape in Africa. Through concerted efforts and collaboration, Africa can harness its potential to become a significant player in AI research and development on the global stage (Kwanya et al., 2023).

The influence of AI on cultural appropriation raises concerns about the loss of cultural context and the exploitation of marginalized cultures. African culture, in particular, has faced significant appropriation in industries like music and fashion, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and overlooking the creative contributions of African people. Models like Stable Diffusion and OpenAI's DALL-E have faced criticism for reinforcing detrimental stereotypes through the images they generate when prompted to depict African workers. According to Maxwell (2023), despite variations in results, many images representing "African workers" tend to reinforce stereotypes of poverty and lack of sophistication, while those portraying "European workers" often convey wealth and positivity. These instances underscore broader issues of discrimination and bias in AI technologies.

As I discussed earlier, generative AI, which can produce entirely new content, learns from existing datasets, including images scraped from the web. However, this reliance on existing data means that biases present in the training data can manifest in the generated output. Critics contend that the way the IT sector approaches generative AI mirrors the move-fast-and-break-things approach of social media platforms, prioritizing innovation over ethical considerations.

Efforts currently in place to mitigate bias in AI models include improving data collection methods and implementing safety mechanisms or disclaimers to alert users to potential stereotypes. However,



The influence of AI on cultural appropriation raises concerns about the loss of cultural context and the exploitation of marginalized cultures. African culture, in particular, has faced significant appropriation in industries like music and fashion



manual data collection is costly, and biases in existing datasets can be deeply ingrained. Additionally, AI models like Stable Diffusion integrate systems such as CLIP (Contrastive Language Image Pre-training), which have been found to exhibit gender and racial biases. Bias in AI extends beyond cultural representation in art and has tangible consequences, such as misidentifications of people with African descent in facial recognition technology and biased decision-making in criminal justice systems. Clear guidelines are needed for the use of AI models in high-risk settings to prevent harm.

The future of artistic expression on the continent

The integration of Artificial Intelligence and African art offers a significant chance to rethink artistic expression throughout the continent. By harnessing AI-powered tools and technologies, African artists are pushing the boundaries of creativity, introducing a new era of innovation.

One such artist is Osborne Macharia, a Kenyan photographer specializing in commercial and advertising photography, who has gained worldwide recognition for his compelling visual storytelling. His work effortlessly combines elements of Afrofuturism with traditional African aesthetics, showcasing alternative realities that question conventional understandings of African history and culture.

One outstanding project in Macharia's portfolio is "Kabangu," a series that portrays a team of elderly Kenyan street entertainers as heroic vigilantes (MoMAA, 2023). Macharia skillfully utilizes digital tools and bold colour schemes to produce visually impactful images that not only honour the endurance and power of African culture but also imagine a more optimistic future. Macharia's visual storytelling goes beyond photography, as he skillfully combines aspects of fantasy, folklore, and modern social commentary. His work exemplifies the influence of creativity in transforming stories and fostering cultural admiration. Macharia has elevated Kenya and East Africa as centers of creativity and innovation in the global visual arts scene by using his art to highlight the beauty and cultural wealth of Africa. (Wamutoro & Makunda, 2022). The success he achieved serves as a prime example of how digital art has the ability to promote cultural appreciation and give a platform to marginalized voices on a global scale.

Yet, alongside this potential come significant challenges, including ethical considerations and cultural biases discussed in this article and even more not covered. Navigating the fine line between cultural appropriation and appreciation is paramount. This necessitates that users and developers of AI work together to give diversity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity first priority. Collaboration among developers, cultural experts, and communities is crucial in navigating this complex intersection, promoting awareness and accountability to ensure AI's positive impact. To foster a more inclusive future for AI art in Africa, collaborative innovation is key. Artists, technologists, policymakers, and communities must unite to spur local innovation, tackle intellectual property issues, and bridge the digital divide. Through this collective effort, Africa can harness AI's transformative power while safeguarding its cultural heritage, paving the way for diverse artistic expression and global recognition.

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ChatGPT and University Examinations

Lydia Muthuma

Is ChatGPT interfering in university examinations?

Facilitators of learning, be they teachers or lecturers, are required to teach and then assess the learners –give exams in popular parlance. In examining an ordinary class, few students score high marks, many score averagely while a few perform below average. This culture has since changed. After November 2022 when ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) was launched, most students score high marks. I found the answers and writing style of my students greatly improved without any extra input from me. Assignment essays contained complete sentences; with a verb, starting with a capital letter and ending with a full stop. Without understanding the reason behind the improved grades, I shared my good news with colleagues who reported similar improvement. What effective teaching method had we stumbled upon? Surely, we ought to be recognised for improving student's capacities almost overnight!

Alas, the good news was as fleeting as it was unbelievable, for students were keying in assignment questions into a new digital app, ChatGPT.¹ After which they handed in the Artificial Intelligence (AI) responses as their authentic assignments. We, the facilitators, were marvelling at essays written by a chatbot, not by flesh-and-blood students. We were assessing a digital system, a Large Language Model (LLM) in lieu of human minds. LLMs are very large deep learning models that are pre-trained on vast amounts of data. Their underlying transformer is a set of neural networks.² Designers of LLMs are yet to comprehend how exactly the human neural system works in processing and achieving learning. Notwithstanding the semi-comprehension, software engineers took the short-cut of mapping and mimicking real biological neural networks onto vast amounts of data. The biomimicry is only apparent because human minds can draw meaning and make generalisations even from a single *datum* while AI, like chatGPT 3.5, cannot. AI requires data in vast amounts if it is to recognise human-like patterns and sequences.³

What then is the rationale behind LLMs? I shall respond as an end user, situated in the formal learning environment, where three distinct choreographed steps are enacted: first, teaching-learning; second, assessment through examinations; third, certification by issuing diplomas/degrees. The second step is singled out to highlight some changes in the culture of examinations, making the impact of ChatGPT on undergraduate examinations, the focus of this essay.

1. ChatGPT and University Examinations

When prompted with the question, what is ChatGPT, the system answers:

ChatGPT is the persona of the language model you're currently interacting with! It's based on OpenAI's GPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) architecture, designed to understand and generate human-like text based on the input it receives. ChatGPT is trained on a diverse range of internet text and can engage in conversations, answer questions, provide explanations, generate creative content, and more. Essentially, it's a tool that aims to assist and interact with users in a way that feels natural and helpful.⁴

¹ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) is an Artificial Intelligence (AI) language model which is trained on vast amounts of text data to understand and generate human-like text.

²cf. www.cloudflare.com (a global network operating on the Internet for security and performance of services)

³cf. ox.ac.uk/news/2024 Study shows that the way the brain learns is different from the way that artificial intelligence systems learn

⁴cf. www.Wikipedia "ChatGPT is credited with starting the AI boom... By January 2023 it had become the fastest growing consumer software application in history... it's release spurred the release of competing products, including Gemini, Ernie, LLaMA, Claude and Grok. OpenAI has proceeded to GPT-4 [which is not run on freenomics]. Observers raise concern about the potential of ChatGPT and similar programmes to displace or atrophy human intelligence, enable plagiarism or fuel misinformation."

Facilitators of undergraduate learning ought to welcome AI chatbots as **tools** for learning – but are the chatbots used in this manner? Given assignments to assess their mind's position regarding the learning process, students often turn in answers from AI, blocking the direct contact between their minds and the examiner. They sandwich this passage with chatbot responses. For instance, after a series of lectures on art history, an assignment was given to students, some of them consulted ChatGPT, turning in similar essays with little or no variation as seen in the sample below:

Student input: Should history of art be taught in Kenya?

ChatGPT: crossed out and replaced with the student's number.

Teaching the history of art in Kenya could be immensely beneficial for several reasons. Here are a few points to consider:

Cultural Enrichment: Studying art history exposes students to various cultures, traditions, and artistic expressions from around the world. This can foster a deeper appreciation for diversity and promote cross-cultural understanding.

Critical Thinking Skills: Analyzing works of art involves critical thinking and interpretation. It encourages students to ask questions, make connections, and develop their analytical skills, which are valuable in many aspects of life.

Creativity and Expression: Learning about different art movements and styles can inspire creativity and self-expression among students. It can also help them understand the importance of artistic freedom and the role of art in society.

Historical Context: Art is often a reflection of the historical, social, and political context in which it was created. Studying art history can provide insights into different time periods and help students understand historical events and societal norms.

Career Opportunities: Knowledge of art history can open up various career opportunities in fields such as art curation, museum management, art education, and art conservation.



Cultural Heritage and Preservation: Teaching art history can contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage by instilling a sense of pride and responsibility towards artistic traditions and heritage sites

Overall, incorporating the history of art into the curriculum in Kenya could enrich students' educational experience and contribute to their personal and intellectual development.

The intended assessment of mind-processes –like relating ideas to arrive at a logical conclusion or choosing data to build up an argument– was rendered impossible. Indeed, how assess a chatbot's ready-made conclusions? What meaning would a grade assigned to these essays convey?

With unsophisticated adjustments to the above chatbot response, essays written in this vein were turned in as examination assignments. One way of explaining the general uniformity in the framework and language of the over 60 essays, is that they were copied-and-pasted from the conversational ChatGPT. While the essays reflected a small amount of the data available to the chatbot, they said little about the actual thought-process of individual students. It was obvious that this was *information* fetched from a digital receptacle and not the *knowledge* processed and acquired by human minds.⁵ The intended assessment of mind-processes –like relating ideas to arrive at a logical conclusion or choosing data to build up an argument– was rendered impossible. Indeed, how assess a chatbot's ready-made conclusions? What meaning would a grade assigned to these essays convey?

Used in this way, the chatbot blocks a facilitator's access to the students' minds, finding himself/herself assessing a software system instead. Formal learning institutions are all about learning, assessing and certifying the individual performance of students; one goes to college to earn a degree. However, since openAI launched ChatGPT 3.5,⁶ facilitators run the risk of engaging amalgamated artificial intelligence rather than individual human faculties. Chatbots are impacting the culture and *raison d'être* of formal theoretical assessment of learning.

2. The purpose of examinations

In an effort to empathise with students, I prompted the same ChatGPT, asking it the reason for examinations.

This author: why are students given examinations?

ChatGPT: Students are given examinations for several reasons, which serve both educational and practical purposes:

Assessment of Learning: Examinations are used to assess students' understanding and knowledge of the subjects they are studying. They provide a way to gauge how well students have absorbed the material taught in class.

Feedback and Improvement: Examinations offer feedback to students on their strengths and weaknesses in specific areas. This feedback allows students to identify areas where they need to improve and focus their efforts accordingly.

Accountability: Examinations help hold students accountable for their learning. By testing their knowledge and skills, exams encourage students to take their studies seriously and strive for academic success.

Evaluation of Teaching: Examinations also serve as a tool for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching methods and curriculum. By analyzing exam results, educators can identify areas where students are struggling and adjust their teaching strategies accordingly.

Certification and Credentialing: Examinations often serve as a means of certifying students' proficiency in a particular subject or field. Passing exams may be necessary

⁵cf. Muthuma (2024) *Indigenous Art in the Lodwar Cathedral, Kenya*. Proceedings of the 3rd IKM international Conference held in TUK (in press) The author explains the difference between information and knowledge.

⁶Reference is made specifically to this version of OpenAI's GPT because it is the one that went viral. It is also operated along the lines of freenomics unlike other versions like GPT 4.

for students to progress to the next level of education or to obtain certain qualifications or credentials.

Standardization: Examinations help standardize the evaluation process across different students, schools, and educational systems. They provide a common measure of academic achievement that can be used for comparisons and benchmarking.

Overall, examinations play a crucial role in the educational system by assessing student learning, providing feedback for improvement, and ensuring accountability and standardization.

Although the above answer is comprehensive and accurate, it is devoid of identity (unique characteristics that identify a person as themselves and no one else) and therefore lacks the crucial authenticating capacity of self-reflection. Further, it is unanchored, providing qualified value because of the inherent non-parity between a non-self chatbot and a conscious human self. After all "AI is a **simulation** [emphasis mine] of human intelligence processes... including learning, reasoning and self-correction. AI can be applied to various tasks traditionally requiring human intelligence..." but, it cannot take an examination. The rationale behind examinations is not applicable because AI cannot assess itself for learning, it cannot tell that it knows (or has learnt), it has no capacity for self-reflection.

AI only simulates human intelligence processes without causing learning. Learning is here understood as flexing the mind's metaphorical muscles in acquiring knowledge or logical truth⁷. This is the core reason for examinations. They assess learning/acquiring knowledge; the key action is to activate the human mind, to get it to wrestle with ideas. Contrariwise ChatGPT's purpose is to 'play' at human-like conversation. Once prompted, the artificial system 'pretends' to respond like a generic human mind. The problem is, there are no generic human minds, let alone minds functioning independently of the ensemble called a total human person. Those quirky qualities like spontaneity, eccentricity and unique identity are simply way beyond the realm of AI even with its astounding amount of data and generic responses. AI stores information while human minds exercise (or actualise) their capacity to turn information into intellectual knowledge – the rationale behind examinations.

An examination takes place to establish a meeting of minds between the lecturer and the student. Its main purpose is to assess what transpires in the student's mind regarding specific content, theory or mode of thinking-through aspects of the discipline being learnt/taught.

3. Examiner's reaction to chatbot assignments

To its credit, ChatGPT has a 'genuine' answer to measuring learning (examinations). It declares:

I can't directly measure how much you've learned in the traditional sense, as I don't have access to your personal history or experiences. However, I can certainly engage in conversations, answer questions, provide explanations, and offer assistance on a wide range of topics. By interacting with you, I can help reinforce your understanding of certain subjects, clarify concepts, and even provide practice questions or quizzes to help you assess your knowledge. Ultimately, though, the assessment of your learning would likely require a more comprehensive evaluation conducted by educators or through formal assessments.

This response propels us into a more positive direction: AI cannot measure learning but it can nonetheless be a useful learning tool. According to a 2023 article in *The New York Times*, the immense potential of using ChatGPT as an educational tool far outweighs the risk of using it for cheating on homework.⁸ This was written about students that are slightly younger than undergraduates. The observations are however applicable, *mutatis mutandi*, to university learning/examinations. Faced with the art history essay assignments mentioned above, that were copied from ChatGPT, I considered ranting and raving sufficiently to the students, accompanied by a downward moderation of their grades. But I realised the action would have little positive

⁷cf. [https://plato.stanford.edu/Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Logical truth as distinct from ontological reality](https://plato.stanford.edu/Stanford%20Encyclopedia%20of%20Philosophy/Logical%20truth%20as%20distinct%20from%20ontological%20reality/). The terms correspond to the order of logic and that of ontology. An intellect learns/knows logical truths; it understands the concept chair without carrying the actual physical chair in itself. Logical truth is apprehended from existing ontological reality.

⁸Kevin Roose (2023) Don't Ban ChatGPT in Schools. Teach with it. (December 1, 2023) *The New York Times* <https://nytimes.com>



As essay number twos were handed in though, I asked that information from the first assignment (harvested from ChatGPT) be incorporated and the resultant essay (now number three) be synthesised, expanded and written in each student's voice. The initial single assignment was done in three stages; it consumed a lot of time and patience to get an authentic response from students while broadening their perspective by incorporating information from ChatGPT.

effect. It would not advance the self-assessment of students' learning, their minds would not engage any better with the situation of art history in Kenya.

An alternate line of action was to point out –respectfully– to these students that I traced their essays to ChatGPT. Could they write down several advantages and disadvantages of having sourced information, uncritically, from the chatbot? I added, for good measure, that I would grade the essays (assignment number two) and record the grades as the final examination performance. As essay number twos were handed in though, I asked that information from the first assignment (harvested from ChatGPT) be incorporated and the resultant essay (now number three) be synthesised, expanded and written in each student's voice. The initial single assignment was done in three stages; it consumed a lot of time and patience to get an authentic response from students while broadening their perspective by incorporating information from ChatGPT.

Learning institutions and facilitators distinguish information repositories from knowledge acquired by students. Not unlike a physical library or a digital search engine, ChatGPT is

also an information repository, with this significant difference: while both the library and search engine allow for acknowledgement of the original author of any given idea, ChatGPT does not. It crawls over its vast cache of data, in responding to a prompt, without paying attention to the originator/author of the ideas. It therefore invalidates the notion of copyright, yet students are carefully guided to exercise their own minds without confusing own-achievement with plagiarism –the passing on of ideas processed by another mind as if they are one's own or pretending to have reached a conclusion without exercising one's thinking capacity. Students are taught to own their thinking right (*ius* in Latin, *iura* in plural) and consequently respect others' copyright. A telling example is the lawyer who filed a suit for personal injury using ChatGPT. The AI bot delivered fake cases prompting a judge to weigh sanctions (...)⁹. Since artificial ideas cannot be accredited to a real self, they are unnatural holders of any *ius*.

4. Why care? conclusion and the way forward

Although using AI in human learning and examination processes is a significant step, the complicating nuances ought to be considered. University examinations deal with live human beings, phrases like 'so-and-so is an A student' bring home the intimate relationship between examination grades and a unique, individual human person. The culture in local universities has been to emphasise the epistemic value at the expense of the ethic and aesthetical. Examinations tend to isolate and hierarchise the acquisition of information –which process can be easily replicated by AI– while the real purpose is to evaluate the acquisition of knowledge, learning the truth.

Learning 'truth' involves the totality of the human psyche; it forms part of the mind's wholesome process including evaluating the truth of beliefs and related cognitive acts, ethical evaluating of conduct, keeping in mind that human conduct is part of culture. Aesthetics, in turn, comprise a critical examination of art, culture and nature; an ethical action is a beautiful action measured by our values. These different facets of evaluation are as intimately linked as truth, good and beauty co-here in the same ontological reality.

This discussion however, is better suited to a philosophical essay. Suffice it to mention that it is unwise (unnatural) to separate the epistemic from the ethical and aesthetical. In most evaluations a human person considers these three transcendentals asking: is it true? is it good? and is it beautiful? –all wrapped into a single query. Therefore, the laudable attempt to assist human intelligence processes with AI has so far addressed the epistemic category only, leaving out the ethic and aesthetical. Despite AI's achievements, it has not been a resounding success in holistic human-mimicry.

The hidden danger in a skewed emphasis of the higher faculties, like overemphasising acquisition of information, can atrophy the psyche's self-regulation, causing neurosis. Un-exercised internal faculties interfere with what psychologists call the internal locus of control, denying a person the power of agency. When the capacity to receive information is exercised solely, a person does not learn how to marshal most of his/her psychological attributes to become the agent of one's own life. Empirical studies are yet to verify this hypothesis but the rise of neurosis in high achieving students is evident; the loss of a fulfilling sense of meaning and purpose in a human who is otherwise well adjusted enough for everyday life. An overly intellectual exercise, shorn of the commitment/involvement of the whole person, was blamed by Carl Jung for causing neurosis.¹⁰ This creates typical manifestations of inferior insight and behaviour when extreme function one-sidedness accompanies the neurosis.

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⁹cf. *Lawyer Used ChatGPT In Court –And Cited Fake Cases. A Judge Is Considering Sanctions*, Molly Bohannon (June 8, 2023) www.forbes.com/sites/mollybohannon

¹⁰cf. Carl Gustav Jung (2019) *The theory of Psychoanalysis, Core pattern of emotions, memories, perceptions, and desires*

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The Fear that Producers will reject Playwrights: AI in the Kenyan theatre, harvesting where others have sown!

Fredrick Mbogo

Introduction

On the 29th of February 2024, the Kenya Theatre Awards outfit mounted a colorful awards ceremony in which I was pronounced Kenya's Best Playwright for 2023 for the play, *They that Have Missing Marks Shall not Graduate*. The occasion was lavish, with a tastefully designed stage at the Safari Park Hotel on Thika road in Nairobi. I rushed to the stage when my name was announced and accepted the plaque award handed to me by Kimani Kahuro, the Principle Creative Production Officer at the Kenya Cultural Centre (which incorporates The Kenya National Theatre). At the height of the moment, in those seconds of surprise, "is-it-really-me-that-they-have-just-called", "am-I-standing-here-really", or "this-is-a-dream-eh", the heat was almost unbearable, but there was joy, yes. Clumsily, words came tumbling out of my mouth as I gave an improvised, really unrehearsed, if not giddy, acceptance speech. Those words flew like little pieces of mud towards the listeners' ears as I labored to remember whom to thank for the process of the production that attracted the award! In the end, I was hurriedly prompted off the stage by a sorry Master of Ceremonies speaking over what she was indicating should be my last words. But no sooner had I left the stage than it hit me, that that might as well have been the last playwrights' award given to a human being in Kenya. Why? Because the force with which Artificial Intelligence is coming onto our corridors in the theatre is fast! Artificial Intelligence can write poetry for you these days. That machinery can compose songs, and music. It surely can whip up a monologue or two if you played with it. Technically, if it is writing essays through means like ChatGpt, why won't it put up nice novels. And if it can cook up a novel in a flash, why won't it create a work of drama complete with characters, in a setting, toying in popular themes? Why won't AI simply take over all the jobs of the creatives in theatre? The stage designer is already in trouble, as is the costume designer, and the musician who composes for the theatre is sorry. The director can get a clue or two for his work through AI, ah, but for the producer, the technology is a godsend. A good producer, worried about profits and cutting costs, will definitely fire everyone who costs something! The number one to go will be the playwright. Why must the producer engage a playwright whom he pays if he can play with machinery to get a script?

Can AI write in Nandi?

I sat down with Cosmas Bii, the writer and producer of *Oret*, a play in Nandi language, which was staged last year in Eldoret at Sirikwa Hotel. He seemed very excited about the wonders of AI. "Things are much easier for producers because now we can make posters, for example, the graphic designing costs have come down!" He said. But when I put it to him that his job as a playwright is on the line, he wondered, "How?" I said, "Your future *Oret* could be written through AI technology!" He laughed at me, as though I was ignorant, and said, "Yes, but does AI know Nandi? Can AI ever know the cultural root of the stories I tell? The framers of AI are in the northern climes, in their western countries mining information from us, yes, but they can never get their machines to feel our experiences, to live them even!" I felt chastised for worrying about my future as a writer; but would that mean I can only write in a tongue or of an experience that is far removed from AI's seemingly Western ones? Would I forever be condemned to write in Kikuyu, or the smattering of Kimeru or Kiambu that I can muster in order to circumvent AI's effects on my work like Cosmas Bii does through his use of Nandi?

When I sought audience with Martin Kigundu, the writer and producer of *Matchstick Men*, and *Supanova* at The Kenya National Theatre, in 2023 and 2022, respectively, he said, “Wait! We should look at AI as fire. Yes, I can see why you fear it, but so were the many people who first thought fire so dangerous that it would burn down every one of their possessions. People learnt to work with fire, they tamed it. I see us being in a similar situation, taming AI.” Surely my fears should be extinguished by Kigundu’s confidence but before I can settle to think about it, he digs in with: “As a writer, I feel a good story is a good story – AI might hack that, most likely. A great story, unique or wholesome in a most human way has to be from the point of view of the play, I think. AI might assist the writer perhaps, but fully telling the story by ‘itself’? Hmm. I don’t know.” I interpreted that as a cautious “wait and see” attitude. It reflects the problems of experience, where one must show patience, and learn the trends before committing to state categorically what might happen.

The fearless

Joan Rispa Kiragu, however, is much younger, and can technically be said to have grown up around such gadgetry as mobile phone, internet, computers, and the general infrastructure that avails AI. She is of the Generation Z cluster, born in the late 1990s, and coming of age in the 2000s, with toys that rely on data. Rispa’s generation does not know how to watch television programmes with the faithfulness that the millennials possess. The Generation Z spend an average of four hours everyday on social media (according to Agha Khan University’s Media Innovation Center’s research, 2023). When confronted by my anxiety about my never having to win the Kenya’s best playwright award again, she scoffs at the old-fashioned reasoning in the fears, saying: “Aha! Now you will learn, because AI has come and there is nothing you can do to stop it. First of all, let me speak as a film maker, getting funding to do a film is an extreme sport. But with AI, creating videos for us, I can do a proof of a concept without funds, so the process becomes shorter.” Joan Kiragu is a film maker, she has co-written films like *Ngebe Gaa*, with Cosmas Bii, she has also written *Lame*, which received funding from Kenya Film Commission to the tune of two million shillings in 2020 under the “KFC Empowerment Programme.” She has also written *Detox*, for which she was awarded a Kalasha award by the Kenya Film Commission in 2017 in the “Students feature film category” for her writing and directing. Lately, she has been on a funded tour to Japan where she shot and showcased a film titled *The Herbalist*, at the Nora Film Festival in 2022. Her other projects have involved working across Africa, with Nigeria and Tanzania forming part of her networking areas. One of the contentious issues she raises is that “AI will depend on how creative you are, and whether you would be willing to take a career change to become a “prompt engineer” because some people prompt AI and get just ordinary images and others are more creative and create outstanding images.”

But even before I can wrap my head around the idea of a “prompt engineer”, Joan Kiragu tears into the very fabric of my anxieties, by arguing that AI “will allow us to venture into other fields like sci-fi or horror which are non-African genres, but are only non-African because we don’t have money or technology for us to do the fancy effects.” This statement irks me, and tempts me to run back into the comfort zone that is theatre. For isn’t theatre as basic as a space with actors, in action, with an audience for engagement? Why should the theatre be prompted to get technological? Why should the theatre give up its communal sense, where its main living element is the liveness? There has been a long tradition of defenders of theatre, its liveness, who include Jerzy Grotowski with his, almost hard line stance, of “poor theatre” as explored in his book *Towards a Poor Theatre*. This is a theatre bereft of the means of production beyond the actor, space, and audience. The picture that best captures this is in the words by Peter Brook in his *The Empty Space*, where he avers, “I can take any empty space, and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him and this is all it takes for an act of theatre to be engaged.”

Perhaps this is what inspires me when I get to watch Esther Kamba’s experimental piece called *Numbers*. It features two actors on stage, and a voice from off stage, in addition to some shadow theatre to posit the most difficult memory that the play is made around – the killing of a son

by his mother! The audience is immersed in the play, so that it is part of the action, even if only passively. Each person in the audience can see another's reaction to an incident and therefore modify his reaction. Can this happen under AI? "No!" says Esther Kamba, who is the play's director apart from being its devisor or writer. Indeed, AI cannot get to the point of helping us understand the feelings of the characters on stage. First, Esther Kamba bases her story around Mwhiko road, of the bustling Githurai estate. One must know the possible socio-economic conditions of people around Mwhiko to tell this story. Can AI get to know this and tell it so well? Esther Kamba does not think highly of AI's ability for that. The story is about a matatu driver who marries a girl from "ubabini" (sheng for a girl brought up by rich parents, from Karen in this case). Their relationship is doomed from the beginning, as the man thinks his poor background will cause a rift, bring disrespect from the girl, and predictably this eats into his self-esteem. When I put it to Esther Kamba that AI will eventually learn how to tell stories like hers on stage, she said, "Not so fast." She sounded more like Cosmas Bii, holding onto the idea that "Well, unless AI really discovers how people behave, and can predict how people would react to particular situations. I mean, I can use AI to look up something, get an understanding of something I don't know, and refine it for my own play, but I don't know if AI will be so fast at understanding human experience." That should have given me comfort yet I persisted and asked her what she thinks of Kenyan playwrighting in general. In any case, she has only been in Kenya for the last nine years of her adult life, having received her high school education and theatre training in Canada. "There seems to be a problem," she says, "Where are the older playwrights apart from John Sibi-Okumu and Sitawa Namwalie?" I try to point her in the direction of *Performing Power: Ethnic Citizenship, Popular Theatre and the Contest of Nationhood in Modern Kenya*, the 2009 book by George Ota, which lays out the difficulties of writing or staging plays in Kenya during President Moi's reign between 1980 and 2003. The book, which is also a telling of the history of theatre in Kenya, appreciates the problems of Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, in their work at Kamirithu which birthed *Ngaahika Ndeenda* and *Maitu Njugira*, and contrasts them with Francis Imbuga's approaches. In there, Esther Kamba's question becomes "What happened to the other playwrights?" I list them, at least the ones that are published or practiced beyond the confines of schools' drama festivals; Wahome Mutahi, Oby Obyerodhiambo, Okiya Omtata, Jimi Makhotsi, Alakie Mboya, David Mulwa, and Barnabas Kasigwa. Esther Kamba thinks that if we knew the works of these people more, then maybe that knowledge could push us to creating more quality plays. She has for the last three years been involved in a play-reading exercise at the Goethe Institute every other month. The play readings have become popular. Works such as *Meetings* by John Sibi-Okumu, and *Dedan Kimathi* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Mugo, have been read there to full houses. But what if AI can learn about, or the how of, Kenya's playwrighting from these pioneer writers? "That is not a problem that should worry us at this moment in time," opines Esther Kamba. "Even though can learn," she adds, "It will take time before it comes close to understanding how we write!"



Conclusions

I still have lingering feelings of nervousness for the craft of playwrighting when AI is mentioned. This is partly because I cannot quite reconcile Joan Rispa Kiragu's idea of a playwright becoming a mere "prompt engineering" with Cosmas Bii's, or indeed Esther Kamba's, almost near arrogant idea that we humans are special and that AI might never catch up with how we craft or imagine or tell stories to a live audience. This uneasiness is compounded by Martin Kigundu's analogy of fire, and how when well used it can become useful in making us eat cooked meat, improving our menu composed mostly of raw meat. This is a reminder of a presentation that I have watched about AI, from youtube in which parts of the eloquent argument by Mustafa Suleyman, the CEO of Microsoft AI can be paraphrased as "we have evolved from Homo erectus to Homo technologicus." It means that we must adapt.

When I enter the question: "Will AI replace Kenya's playwrights?" in the ChatGPT box, the reply from this very well trained machine said, "AI technology has the potential to assist or augment the work of Kenyan playwrights, but its unlikely to entirely replace them." It goes on to talk about cultural nuances and understanding which Kenyan playwrights can have and AI might not get to. Yet, I fear ChatGPT is wrong on this one. It hasn't considered the craft of playwrighting that I am worried about. It cannot know about the idea, for example of crystalizing a story in the mind for some time in the head, and some approaches of trying to create character profiles, and raising a story to certain levels, or creating an arc, as is the formula by some playwrights. These processes can take sometimes up to a year for a playwright to come out of a room with a fully written play. But with AI, and Joan Kiragu's notion of the "prompt engineer", one can put up a play in minutes. Why should a producer wait on the long-suffering playwright who will take a whole year, and who will demand pay for his creative work? Welcome to the world of prompt engineers, winning Kenya's Best Playwright Award soon, very soon!

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Staged Plays

Oret, Cosmas Bii (writer), 64 Theatre, First staged at Sirikwa Hotel, Eldoret (2023)

Matchstick Men, Martin Kigundu (writer), Prevail Presents, First staged at Kenya National Theatre (Ukumbi Mdogo), Nairobi (2019)

Supanova, Martin Kigundu (writer), Prevail Presents, First Staged at Kenya National Theatre (Ukumbi Mdogo), Nairobi (2021)

Numbers, Esther Kamba (Writer), Sifa Arts, First Staged at Creative Garage (The Mall Basement, Westlands), Nairobi (2024)

They that Have Missing Marks Shall Not Graduate, Fredrick Mbogo (Writer), Prevail Presents, First Staged at Kenya National Theatre (Ukumbi Mdogo), Nairobi (2023)

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Digitisation of Traditional African Games: Doing it For The Greater Good

Walter Ngano

Throughout time, African communities have engaged in games mostly as a form of leisure but also for learning or competition. Men, women and children have participated in games to unwind after a long day, during special traditional ceremonies such as weddings, or purely for entertainment. From “*Donga/stick fighting*” in Ethiopia, “*Akseltag*” in Morocco, “*Ayo Olopon*” in Nigeria, “*Engolo*” in Angola and “*Laamb*” in Senegal, traditional games represent a significant portion of the culture of African communities. As such, the communities hold these games dear and feel a strong sense of sentiment towards them.

With the passing down of such games from one generation to another, African communities have been able to preserve their culture and heritage, sharing values and beliefs that some of the games carry. However, culture is not fixed but keeps on changing and evolving as circumstances, ideas, and interactions change. Over the years, a rapid evolution of African communities has led to the rapid change in culture and, in turn, these traditional games some of which have even been lost. This is evident in Kenya where the great fabric that sustained some invaluable aspects of culture has changed so much that some of the critical elements that make up our traditional practices have faded away.

Traditional games have dwindled because of technology especially through gadgets such as mobile phones, computers, laptops, gaming consoles. The Internet, not the traditional trainer, is the primary facilitator for these games, providing a seamless digital platform that people immerse themselves in. The effect of online gaming is significant with traditional games being forgotten. All is not lost, however. *Rubiks Digital*, founded in 2019 by a group of tech professionals, addresses this challenge. Through their mobile app platform *PlayOn Games*, they seek to educate in and promote gaming in Africa while seeking partnerships with other entities in the region. In speaking to *Twaweza Communications*, Anthony Okeyo, *Rubiks*’ CEO, says the ban on gambling, in 2019, by the then Cabinet Secretary for Interior, Fred Matiang’i, along with the consternation of a 16-year old winning 2.6 million dollars as prize money in an international e-sports event, provided the lightbulb moment that led to the formation of *Rubiks Digital*. “The question for me at that point was, the government was pushing youngsters away from gambling; but I wasn’t hearing what the alternative was. So, in a conversation about League of Legends and the young winner, I asked, considering that the youth of today across the globe, are pretty much similar in trends and character, why wasn’t eSport catching on in Africa? My answer was: probably, we as Africa, need to approach eSport in a way that is native to us. A solution to gambling would be something that provides the youth with an avenue for entertainment as well as with financial gain. The logic was, if we recognise that we are an economy of a dollar a day [then] we should approach people with an affordable cost, making the learning curve less steep. If all of us played *bano*, which is a game of skill involving marbles and *kati* [Kenyan version of dodgeball] at the level of simple games, we should deliver these on the device most used and most affordable in Africa –that is the mobile phone. We can then probably break into eSports. That is actually how *Rubiks Digital* was born.”

Rubiks aims to safeguard African traditions and history by digitising traditional African games and advance it to the younger generation. Their crown jewel in this endeavour is *Ajua*, a traditional mancala board game played in most parts of Africa. In Kenya, it is prevalent in the

Nyanza, Western and Coast regions (*Bao*.) The game is played on a wooden board which consists of two rows with eight holes each with a large store at each end. It challenges one's mental flexibility and mathematical prowess as opponents move around the shallow holes. Anthony describes the process of developing their games and highlights *Ajua*. "We found out that there were *Ajua* clubs in Kibera. So we went there, sponsored some games, played them so that we could actually understand the excitement and the rules applied so that we could convert all that into a playable digital platform. So typically, it is observation, turning that into a code and then turning it into a game." In its prime, *Ajua* had an organised competitive league that drew teams from all over Kenya. Present day, it is mostly played at a reduced rate and by the elderly which in hindsight, therein lies the problem. Lack of youth involvement in playing traditional games is an issue that Rubiks is striving to correct. They aim to give incentives centred on gifts and rewards that they hope will attract the younger generation. He underlines the importance of fool proofing this around the family setting where parents are fully involved. Aside from *Ajua*, Rubiks also have other traditional games like *Kadi* which in essence is the Kenyan version of poker. They also have a new game in the pipeline, *Shaka Zulu* that is based on the famous story of *Shaka*. This game carries a bit more nuance. Anthony stresses the need to have in-depth knowledge of the history, the stories and hopes to add other African stories in the game of *Shaka Zulu* to ensure the full experience of the African culture. They rejoice in the fact that there is a bubbling market in Africa for their work. Industry reports indicate about 28 percent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is connected to the Internet of which 186 million play video games. In addition, it is projected that there will be 98 million new mobile Internet subscribers by the year 2025.

Rubiks Digital is determined to change the narrative and use e-gaming as an avenue for cultural preservation. They aim to drive this through three pillars; *infotainment*, *edutainment* and *entertainment*. By reimagining *Ajua* for the new generation, *Rubiks* hope to keep hold of the culture of Kenyan communities. The aftermath of the Covid-19 global pandemic has only served to reinforce the need for digitisation and underscores the importance of preserving our African culture and heritage. In their efforts, *Rubiks* recognises the value of embracing the diversity in our various African cultures. While it is known as *Ajua* in Kenya, Tanzanians refer to it as *Bao* and Ugandans *Omweso*. *Rubiks* have been cognizant of this and have tailored the game to fit the different cultural markets. For the gaming community, the availability of such games presents a fresh perspective on how they can indulge in e-sports. To ensure that such games are readily available, *Rubiks* develop games that can run on cheap, low quality Android phones that the bulk of their target market use.

Even with the great benefits they bring, *Rubiks Digital* still faces obstacles along the way. As a first of their kind in Kenya, challenges in comprehension of their concept and what they aim to bring on the gaming table arise. This together with little to no existing knowledge amongst the youth on the type of games developed is a double whammy in their efforts. On top of this, parents who carry negative preconceived notions about gaming present more complications. However, *Rubiks* remain optimistic they will overcome this by helping parents see the value of eSports both as an engagement tool and employment creator. Aside from that, the regulatory regime in the country has presented *Rubiks* with unavoidable challenges. Anthony says, "Initially, gambling in its regulation, had assumed the name gaming. So when we went to the Betting Control and Licensing Board (BLCB), they first put you in gambling, then they scrutinise you, which can be frustrating. And so now even them they do not know how to handle us. That was a problem but that was resolved by the eSports Kenya Federation which falls under the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture being formed."

In the global context, digitisation of traditional games has taken hold particularly in India. For instance, chess has greatly benefited from digitisation with Indian variations of the game such as *Chaturanga*, *Shatranj* and *Xiangqi* being available on online platforms such as *Chess.com*. Furthermore, *Andar Bahar*, India's most popular casino game can be found at any renowned online andar bahar site. By digitisation of such games, this has led to the establishment of a

great online community that has driven up the growth and development of such games. Also, through the concept of innovation, which involves coming up with new forms and experiences of traditional games using digital tools and techniques, India has been able to preserve their culture and heritage. A report by *Techspective* highlights the case of Ludo; a traditional board game in India. Innovation has enabled its variants *pachisi* and *parcheesi* to maintain its individuality and variety in the digital space. Furthermore, innovation has facilitated the creation and growth of new and original games based on Ludo's game ideas and mechanics. This has effectively ensured that Ludo remains a mainstay in Indian society and culture.

Questions might still linger whether digitisation of traditional African games will be accepted by the elderly in the society as they are regarded as the gatekeepers of their cultures. Moreover, the reception by other stakeholders such as the gaming community, government, youth and global organisations is also critical to the operations of *Rubiks*. Thankfully for Anthony, there has been a positive reaction towards their work. *Rubiks* have been able to create meaningful relationships with the eSports federation that have helped advance their cause. For the youth, a collaboration with the National Youth Council has enabled them to make great strides. Global and government agencies have also warmed up to *Rubiks* giving them positive feedback. With the elderly, Anthony reiterated that through engaging them, explaining in-depth the importance of digitising the games and hearing their input in the formation of these games great responses have been recorded and they have been really supportive of their work.

In addition, the erosion of the core elements of these games and the risk of identity loss when these games are in the digital realm still provide doubt in the minds of some. In response, *Rubiks* have taken the necessary steps to ensure the games are historically accurate.

Nonetheless, Africans should look at the bigger picture which is preservation of culture and heritage that has the ability to withstand the test of time. In his closing remarks, Mr Anthony says, "Through eSports and digitisation overall, Africa has a real chance to define itself and to put true the African narrative."

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Collaborating with AI in Creative Writing

Cajetan Boy

I've been writing for nearly 30 years—long enough to have seen the evolution from typewriters to AI. Growing up, my mind was a playground of stories, but the challenge was always how to capture them quickly, accurately, and permanently enough. My sister typed my first script on a typewriter, a process as slow and laborious as writing a novel with a quill. But at the end of it, I had my first typed manuscript. Then came the computer and WORD and suddenly, I could do so much more and save time. Back then, mastering WORD's script formatting was like learning to write with invisible ink, a frustrating endeavor until one experiences the satisfaction of seeing a perfectly formatted page.

The arrival of the World Wide Web provided a vast reservoir of information at our fingertips. This was another monumental game changer and for me, made my research work faster and more enriching. Other technologies followed; script formatting software, advanced grammar checking tools, and predictive typing software and many more. These innovations sped up the scriptwriting process so much, it felt like moving again from handwriting to typing. Then came AI. As a lifelong fan of science fiction and futuristic technologies, I have eagerly anticipated AI and still look forward to the advent of full Artificial General Intelligence. In my experience there are four categories of thought and practice in integrating AI as writer. These appear to be the common trend among other sectors too.

On one end is the "Doom and Gloom" group who believe that human writers are doomed because AI can write material faster. This is not the case—yet as AI lacks the human creative spark and works best when guided by a human. So currently it is more like a powerful tool that enhances what you create but doesn't replace the writer's creativity. So, the writers' jobs are safe... for now. Meanwhile on the other end of the spectrum is the "Ignore It" group, some of who believe AI can never match the nuance and emotional content of human writing despite ongoing developments suggesting that it's just a matter of time before AI writes a novel that makes us all rethink our career choices. In between these two extremes lie the "It's Cheating" group who believe that using AI is cheating despite it being like other technologies which are meant to assist and enhance our capabilities, not diminish them. The other in-between position which I favour is the "Let's Collaborate with AI" group for whom AI is a tool that's here to stay and by embracing AI, writers can enhance their productivity and creativity, leveraging technology to push the boundaries of their work.

Let's take a quick look at the advantages and disadvantages AI presents to writers,

Advantages of AI for the writer

With regard to automation AI can handle repetitive tasks, freeing up human time for more creative and complex work. Think of it as your very own digital scribe who never needs a coffee break. This can revolutionize the workflow for writers, as tasks like grammar checking, basic edits, and data entry can be done almost instantaneously, leaving more room for creative processes. Imagine having a tireless assistant who never tires, never complains, and always follows your instructions perfectly.

On efficiency, consider that AI processes vast amounts of data quickly and accurately, helping make better decisions faster. It's like having a super-fast, super-smart research assistant at your beck and call. For instance, need to fact-check a historical event or find a synonym that fits

perfectly? AI can handle these tasks in milliseconds, much like having a research assistant who's read every book and forgets nothing. Since AI performs tasks with high precision and accuracy, this reduces errors and improving outcomes. It's like having a spellchecker that's always one step ahead. This means fewer typos, better grammar, and a more polished final product. It's akin to having an eagle-eyed editor who catches every mistake before it reaches the audience.

AI can tailor experiences for users, addressing specific challenges faced by individual writers. Imagine having an editor who knows your quirks better than you know your own writing style. Whether it's adjusting the tone to match your style or suggesting improvements based on your past work, AI can personalize suggestions to fit your unique voice and needs. It's like having a bespoke editor for your words. Further, AI-powered systems operate non-stop, providing continuous services and support around the clock. Insomniac writers have just found a new best friend for their midnight musings. Unlike human collaborators who need sleep, AI can provide feedback, suggestions, and edits anytime, ensuring that your creative flow is never interrupted, even at 3.00am when inspiration strikes.

By automating processes and improving efficiency, AI helps writers save time and reduce costs. For freelance writers or those working on a tight budget, AI tools can significantly cut down on the time and money spent on revisions and edits, making the entire writing process more cost-effective and streamlined.

Disadvantages of AI for the writer

While AI offers many benefits, it also has several limitations. First and foremost, AI lacks human creativity and intuition. It can follow predefined rules and patterns but struggles with innovative thinking or understanding complex emotions. Think of it as a really smart robot that can't tell a joke to save its circuits. While AI can generate text and mimic styles, it often lacks the depth and originality that comes from human experience and emotion. It's like asking a computer to write a poem—it can replicate techniques but not the soul behind the art.

Further, the performance of AI relies heavily on the quality and quantity of its training data. Biased or incomplete data can result in inaccurate predictions and decisions. It's like trying to write a story with a pen that keeps running out of ink. Without high-quality, diverse datasets, AI cannot provide reliable or fair results, making data quality a fundamental factor in its effectiveness. For instance, AI algorithms can reflect biases present in their training data, leading to unfair or discriminatory outcomes. It's like having an editor who's only read one genre and insists every story fits that mold. If the data AI is trained on is biased or unrepresentative, its outputs will reflect those biases, potentially perpetuating stereotypes or inaccuracies and disinformation.

AI struggles with tasks requiring common sense reasoning or context understanding, potentially misinterpreting ambiguous situations. It's the literary equivalent of taking things literally, like writing dialogue for a robot. AI might miss nuances or fail to understand the broader context, leading to outputs that seem logical but miss the mark in real-world applications.

AI may fail to grasp the context of a situation, leading to errors in interpretation or inappropriate responses. It's like having an editor who doesn't get the subtext of your story. Context is crucial in writing, from understanding subtext to capturing the right tone, and AI's limitations in this area can lead to missteps that require human correction. In addition, AI can sometimes generate false or misleading information. It's like having a writing partner who's a habitual embellisher—fun in fiction, not so much in nonfiction. AI can produce outputs that sound plausible but are factually incorrect, necessitating careful review and verification by human writers.

Overall, while AI has made significant advancements, addressing these limitations is crucial for ensuring its responsible and beneficial integration into society.

Tips for Using AI in Writing

To get the best results with AI it is imperative to understand the basics of writing. This helps you give prompts that generate helpful material. The more you know about your craft, the easier it is to collaborate with AI for great outputs. It's like knowing your way around a word processor – AI can run the commands, but you need to know what commands to give. A strong foundation in writing fundamentals allows you to guide AI effectively. As noted, clear instructions are key. Just as you'd fine-tune a new software to your preferences, providing precise and thoughtful prompts can greatly enhance AI's output. Detailed, clear instructions help AI understand and fulfill your vision, much like configuring a complex software application to perform specific tasks.

The writer needs to infuse originality by including their unique setting, character traits, plot points etc., and have AI help develop them. Otherwise, the output will be as generic as a fill-in-the-blanks story template. AI is excellent at generating content, but the human touch—your unique voice and perspective—is what makes the work truly special. Think of AI as a powerful tool that needs a skilled writer.

A critical step is to always review and edit any AI-generated material. AI is like a helpful intern—it gets a lot right but still needs your expert eye. AI can generate content quickly, but it's your editorial skills that will polish and perfect it, much like refining a rough draft into a final masterpiece. It is important to use AI as an entry point into the work, and not rely on it for final drafts. Use it to spark creativity and generate ideas. It's like a brainstorming buddy who's always available, never judges, and doesn't hog all the bandwidth. AI can provide a wealth of material to work with or from, but the final touch—the true artistry—comes from you. AI will not make a good writer lazy.

In short, writers who avoid crafting prompts, reading AI-generated material, and editing AI output will struggle with AI, and their work will feel mechanical. Personally, I have found that AI improves my output and saves time, from idea generation to writing dialogue. It has increased the quality and quantity of my work threefold, and I'm just using free, limited versions!

In the rapidly evolving landscape of artificial intelligence, writers are finding themselves at a unique crossroads. Every AI model, whether free or paid, is built on a foundation of training data that is overwhelmingly Western in origin. For creatives using AI, this reality presents both an opportunity and a challenge. It's a reminder that while AI can be a powerful tool, it must be approached with a critical eye, especially when crafting narratives that aim to be original and culturally resonant.

Creative writers are in a particularly nuanced situation. Why? Because AI's training on Western literature—the same body of work that shapes the education of Anglophone students around the globe—means that its outputs will naturally echo familiar sentence structures and thematic elements. Whether generated by an AI or written by a student, these sentences often carry a distinctly Western literary flavor.

This raises an important question: Is it intellectual property (IP) infringement to use the building blocks of language—grammar, syntax, and structure—when creating something new? After all, who owns the IP on the alphabet, words, or even standard sentence constructions?

Consider the following phrases:

- *As the sun set over the city . . .*
- *. . . the road was clogged with traffic.*
- *In a nearby forest . . .*
- *. . . they made love.*
- *The succubus roared . . .*
- *. . . blood splattered across the room!*

Individually, these words and sentences belong to no one. They are the basic tools of communication, free for anyone to use. But once these elements are combined into a poem, a story, or a script, they transform into something new, something original. The writer becomes the originator, the creator of a unique piece of art. By developing characters, plots, and dialogues that are distinctly their own, writers can craft narratives that stand out, regardless of the AI's contributions.

For the skilled writer, AI should be seen as nothing more than a sophisticated word processor—one that understands the formulas and conventions of writing. The true artistry lies in how the writer inputs, edits, and manipulates these formulas. By carefully crafting characters, plotting intricate storylines, and weaving authentic dialogue, the final output becomes undeniably unique.

To avoid the potential pitfalls of IP infringement, it's crucial for writers to ensure that their work is original in its most essential aspects. Character creation, plot development, and dialogue must all bear the unmistakable mark of the writer's personal touch. AI may provide a framework or a starting point, but it's the writer's creativity that brings the story to life. As the saying goes: *"There's nothing new under the sun, but there are new ways to see it."* In the age of AI, this adage has never been more relevant. The tools may change, but the power of storytelling remains firmly in the hands of those who dare to see the world in new and exciting ways.

Conclusion

AI provides the opportunity to turn average writers into good writers, good writers into amazing ones, and amazing writers into prolific ones. However, it will make bad writers worse and will not transform non-writers into writers.

Remember, it isn't about Writer versus AI. It's about a writer who uses AI versus a writer who doesn't. Embrace the future, or be left in the digital dustbin of literary history. Or worse, stuck with that old typewriter, while everyone else is surfing the latest wave of technology. By embracing AI, we can navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of technology in writing, enhancing our skills and creativity. Let's not fear the future; let's shape it with the powerful tools at our disposal.

(The above article is written in collaboration with an AI.)

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SAMPLEBAR KENYA AND BEYOND: On Interactive Ways to Digitize Traditional Music

Kahithe Kiiru

Introduction: The Concept

Although Kenyan, and more generally speaking African, institutions have lagged behind the global movement of redesigning heritage preservation formats, the need to align ourselves to contemporary trends is now widely accepted and implemented to different degrees, with more or less success, across the Continent. The incorporation of digital technology arises as one of the central processes of this recent heritage transformation agenda. At Bomas of Kenya, a state corporation under the Ministry of Gender, Culture, the Arts and Heritage, the mandate and the practical task of preserving and promoting traditional music is in the process of undergoing the same radical overhaul.

The SampleBar Kenya project has, since 2021, been the primary innovation with its unique approach to bridging the gap between tradition and digital technology, between music and museology. This original digital installation seeks innovative ways to offer audiences of all generations, geo-cultural origins, social backgrounds and abilities, a ludic and creative way to discover and interact with the musical heritage of Kenya. The project was developed by Bomas of Kenya and Libido Music, an innovation-driven tech company from Stockholm, Sweden¹. Its essence is interactivity - as they move wooden blocks with QR codes across the SampleBar installations, visitors explore, play with and remix the traditional melodies and rhythms recorded across the ethnically and culturally diverse Kenya, making SampleBar a digital archive with a strong creative note. In addition to the heritage conservation agenda, this novel approach to documentation aims at inspiring new generations of creatives to adopt, adapt and safeguard their musical heritage, consequently strengthening Kenya's creative and cultural industries.

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As its implementation approaches its final stage, several elements of the SampleBar Kenya project call for critical interrogation. *What are the benefits of digital documentation? And what are its risks and limitations? Can the installation ensure a continuum between the physical and the digital spaces of creativity? And will its development lead to improved creativity and marketability of music industry products, together with the improved attractiveness of cultural tourism experiences? And, last but not least, to which extent does this heritage remix benefit the local communities involved in the project?*

This paper discusses the place and role of digital technology in the documentation and exhibition of traditional music in contemporary Kenya, with the ambition to serve as a case study and potential role model to similar processes across the continent. In doing so, we advocate for innovation, sustainability and global marketability as essential components of successful conservation trends and initiatives in the 21st century, as well as for African solutions to the challenges of digitization.

Interrogating The Process

The central component of the SampleBar Kenya project is digital documentation. This primary and simultaneously both most arduous and most rewarding element consisted of research

across Kenya, and field and studio recording of an immense variety of traditional music. In addition, appropriate ethnomusicological and cultural information on the recorded instruments and musical styles was documented and scripted. The project prides itself in acquiring its content at the source, from local/communal practitioners across a total of eight regions of Kenya – Central, Eastern, Coastal Kenya, Western Kenya, Nyanza, Rift Valley, North-Eastern Kenya, and Nairobi metropolitan region. Two and a half years after kick-off, this translates into a balance sheet of over 450 practitioners and over 290 instruments, plus innumerable chants and songs, recorded in twenty-eight (28) improvised recording studios the field team built in numerous rural locations across the country (now referred to as *studio blanketi*). Murang'a to Hola, Kitui to Maralal, Eldoret to Wajir, North Horr to the busiest business district of Nairobi, the project touched on all of the ethnic (and non-ethnic) musical identities and traversed thousands of kilometres in search of authentic Kenyan sounds. This mesmerizing odyssey also included the process of collecting over 300 musical instruments, as the final exhibit will comprise the actual physical instruments displayed in support of and in dialogue with the digital recordings.

Among the many hurdles and challenges encountered along the way, some are quite usual and inherent to fieldwork practice. Logistic and environmental challenges come to mind here, with remote regions that were difficult to access – some due to bad or non-existent road networks, others being unequivocal security risks. The areas and schedules of recording were also rhythmmed to the challenges occasioned by climatic conditions, as our on-site blanket-proofed studios could not isolate the sound of heavy rains and/or winds. The reconnaissance studies conducted by a smaller technical team braved through the dangerous pathways of ethnic tension and insecurity and, therefore, progressively became more and more important and detailed in order to prepare and secure the main recording missions.

The project equally came with its own unique difficulties. Curating the diversity of Kenyan music in a representative and “most authentic” manner was undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges. Whereas project auditions touched thousands of cultural practitioners during the reconnaissance trips, the selection process was eventually left to a team of ethnomusicologists based primarily on video recordings. The most dispiriting realization was made when and where the number of knowledgeable practitioners of a specific musical instrument or genre had been reduced to very few or, in certain instances, only one Elder, attesting to the urgency of the documentation work the project took on. For others, such as the Agikuyu *mūtūrūrū* flute, the project seems to have arrived already too late.

Numerous discussions were led, at different phases of the project, over the best approach to recording traditional music in a novel format of sound samples with respect to both its communal and improvisational nature. The work of the project's Sound Designer was to look for compromises that would allow capturing authentic cultural samples and their adaptation to the constraints of the digital installation with minimal or no “adulteration”. Notably, the recording process contained a significant sound design component, resulting from the need to synchronise all of the samples recorded in one region to enable them to play together in harmony supporting the future visitor's selection and play. This was certainly difficult to achieve in certain contexts, especially when dealing with string and wind instruments that are tuned based on cultural scales and follow a singular musical logic, outside of the predominant Western concepts. Where software limitations and digital solutions built on foreign principles encountered African forms and ways, the negotiation entailed both compromise and musical innovation.

The project team considered it crucial that the project was well received in all localities of recording and that all participants understand the nature and objectives of the project they were involved in. This often proved to be difficult, due to the complexity of the digital technology component, which, in return, placed specific rules on musicians participating



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in the recordings. Commonly encountered language barriers, especially with Elderly practitioners who were often given priority, further complicated these lengthy explanations fraught with distrust towards professional recording equipment. Progressively, the team started relying more on existing video demos of the project prototype to explain its nature and its implications to local participants and other stakeholders. With the last recording session having taken place in Loyiangelani town, Marsabit County on 30th January 2024, the project's digital documentation was fully completed.

Conclusion: The Impact

Even though a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the SampleBar Kenya project remains out of our reach at this stage, especially since the final exhibit has not yet been availed to the general public, we wish to discuss here briefly the project impact and its potential avenues of future growth.

In the process of documenting traditional music in a digital format, the project supported the local music industry both directly, by compensating all participating musicians, and aims at an even more impactful contribution indirectly, by exposing this somewhat forgotten music to a wider international audience. The project, thus, represents the national government's concern to ensure preservation but also the willingness to propose technology-based solutions for the sustainability of local musical practices. Specific and important to the contemporary Kenyan context was the collaboration and partnership with local (County) governments in this process. The presence of the SampleBar team and the evidence of international interest in the local music practice in some of the most remote and marginalized areas of the country has had a significant impact on the County government's involvement and valorization of these practices. This, we believe, represents an original form of advocacy and will, hopefully, have a positive impact on both policy and intervention at the local level to which the Constitution of Kenya (CoK, 2010) devolved a significant amount of responsibility for the preservation of culture.

In addition, one of the targeted groups of beneficiaries of this project has always been the contemporary, often urban-based, music industry operators whose continuous quest for a "Kenyan sound" progressively became characterized by an increased interest in cultural elements. Their reactions to the project's showcases and target audience testing sessions have affirmed that interest and opened up a Pandora's Box filled with both new challenges and new possibilities. Notably, contemporary practitioners are interested in access to and the usage of recorded samples in diverse creative projects with different degrees of commercialization. And although this enthusiasm for cultural samples encourages the documentalists and points out the future potential of the created digital archive, several technical and ethical issues arise.

It is quite clear that copyright protection in traditional music poses a series of challenges due to the difficulty of "making out originality in a finite system" that music (of any type) represents (Zhang 2022). This is further complicated by the lack of a specific Intellectual Property (IP) strategy for traditional music which is often omitted from IP discussions due to its nominally collective ownership and simultaneously unfixed/fluid nature. In the Kenyan context, guidance is offered through the Protection of Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions Act (2016), which states that the creation of derivative works is equally subject to prior and informed consent of the owners of a cultural expression, in this case, of a music. In addition, one of the responsibilities of the national government includes "the protection of traditional knowledge and cultural expressions from misuse and misappropriation" (PTKCE 2016). Over and above, from the perspective of a state agency famous for its preservation efforts and heavily relying on its community networks, ethical issues take precedence over any legal arguments that may be posed. Thus, publishing recorded samples in an open source regime does not seem possible.

Therefore, if the institution decides to move in the direction of digitization as ultimate liberality and accessibility, a potential phase two of the SampleBar project could entail the development of an app and/or of an online digital sample bank (repository) that would avail recorded samples to professional audiences. However, this will require the conceptualization of an unconventional and meticulously legally-proofed system that would ensure the local practitioners and/or communities reap the long-term benefits of any further commercial utilization of the musical samples they had produced. This form of innovation in product and process using digital technologies has enabled Bomas of Kenya to tap into old resources to create new ones and will undoubtedly allow it to reach new markets of digital heritage tourism (Navarrete, 2019). The hypothesis to be tested remains whether this would have a beneficial impact on the wider creative sector by improving the marketability of music products from Kenya and, consequently, the sustainability of the sector itself.

As the project approaches its completion, we look forward to public feedback and critique when select audiences engage with its format and way of presentation. In this, we are aware of the fact that, among fellow Kenyans, the idea of communal ownership of cultural expressions regularly results in lengthy polemics over the boundaries of a community. At this stage, digitization in an African context has not been able to entirely rupture the standard museum practice, where collections are pre-selected and curated, in favor of an alternative format where communities would define their heritage according to their own values. However, it did play with this idea and prompted project participants and beneficiaries to be involved themselves in the curation and design process. This is the next step we wish to advocate for: encouraging social inclusion within heritage projects and organizations from the very beginning of the heritage process (Taylor & Gibson, 2017) would unquestionably open new avenues and result in new African philosophy-centred formats. This project demonstrates the potential of digitization and will, we hope, encourage future efforts in the sector, in Kenya and beyond.

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‘Anguka nayo!’: TikTok and Youth Agency in Kenyan Public Space

Mbũgwa wa Mũngai & Stephen Mutie

Based on the way it was deployed within the context of Kenya’s June–July 2024 Gen Z protests, *maandamano*, the gist of Wadagliz Ke’s song, ‘*Anguka Nayo*’ seems to be not just that the Finance Bill 2024 must fall but also that the youth were committed to going all the way in ensuring that bad governance was rooted out, even if it meant literally falling for the cause (KNCHR, 2024¹). Music and dance feature prominently in youth activities and, in many instances, become a source of concern, especially to the interests of mainstream social-economic and political formations.² In this paper, we argue that the extensive use of TikTok for political purposes, especially during the *maandamano*, is an attempt by the youth to redefine public space in a manner that works for them. In doing so we attempt to rethink Habermas’ conception of the ‘public sphere’ as being organized through a consensus-building process that can then be seen as citizens’ participation in democratic governance³; the youth overrunning Parliament on June 25, 2024, was an emphatic rebuttal of that idea. We hold, instead, that TikTok, with its amplification of outraged youth voices, provides a democratizing alternative space that is not dependent on mainstream structures of power, or the perceived self-serving consensus-building processes that the Kenyan political elite uses to the exclusion of the youth. While we concur that the public sphere can be seen as a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed⁴, we use the term ‘public space’ to indicate the limitless possibilities for social participation imbricated in the term space, free of mainstream power structures that define and reinforce preferred notions and practices in the public sphere. Below, we briefly examine the strategies used on TikTok to claim citizens’ agency. 42 TikTok videos that have utilized sound tracks of either ‘*Anguka Nayo*’, ‘*Reject the Bill*’, and ‘*Freedom Is Coming Tomorrow*’ were viewed and supply the basis for our argument.

Repurposing archives in digital space: the potency of yesterday’s texts today

To claim agency for themselves during the protests, Kenyan youth relied heavily on an intertextual reading of other political and cultural texts. One of the most notable such acts was a critique of Rigathi Gachagua ‘freedom’ speech. Upon being sworn into office on 13th September 2022, Kenya’s Deputy President, Gachagua, spoke to a packed 60,000-capacity stadium and animatedly told the vuvuzela-blowing attendees: ‘Freedom is here with us. I want to tell the people of Kenya, finally you are free. Kenya now is a democratic country.’ [1] Waving miniature Kenyan flags, the charged throngs, mostly youthful ‘hustlers’, spiritedly sang ‘Freedom is coming tomorrow’, the exultant chant from the film *Sarafina* (1992), among other patriotic songs. During the 2022 general elections campaigns, the Deputy President adopted the hip-sounding moniker ‘Riggy G’ and variously proclaimed himself to be ‘the son Mau Mau’, an allusion to the heroes of Kenya’s anti-colonial struggle. By tapping into Kenya’s and South Africa’s liberation-struggle narratives, Gachagua was attempting to construct a myth about himself that would allow him to claim the identity of an oppressed victim who had eventually triumphed over his tormentors. Indeed, the Kenya Kwanza campaign was crafted mainly around an imperative of overthrowing an old, oppressive order (‘dynasty’) by the downtrodden (‘hustlers’; rendered as ‘*hasolas*’ by politicians). However, by June 2024, Kenyan youth had to confront a government they perceived to be ignoring their plight—joblessness, high cost of living and general well-being, among others. They had taken note of the fact that the promise of economic freedom had been deferred.

¹According to a Kenyan Human Rights report 39 youths had been killed during the protests as of 1st July 2024 <https://www.knchr.org/Articles/ArtMID/2432/ArticleID/1200/Update-on-the-Status-of-Human-Rights-in-Kenya-during-the-Anti-Finance-Bill-Protests-Monday-1st-July-2024>

²Walsh, J. (2020). “Social media and moral panics: Assessing the effects of technological change on societal reaction”. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 23 (6): 840–859.

See also Rose, T. (1994). *Black Noise: Rap Music and Culture in Contemporary America*. Wesleyan University Press, Hanover and London.

³Habermas, J. (1992). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Polity Press.

⁴Guzman, A. (2021). *TikTok and the Public Sphere: Examining the Structure of Online Discourse* (Unpublished thesis). Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas.

Thus, in a profoundly ironic twist, on June 18th, 2024, Gachagua's exhortation, 'freedom is here' was reframed as a promise, which was the import of the original text that is the rallying cry in the song, 'Freedom is coming tomorrow' [2][3], as Kenyan youth, comprising mainly Gen Z and assorted *hasolas* now sought their version of freedom. With the realization that the *Sarafina* song may not reverberate as powerfully with their audience, Kenyan youth protestors also adopted Wadagliz's '*Anguka Nayo*', a dance challenge hit produced before the Gen Z protests but which through Tik Tok turned into a political signifier. [4] Protest iconography now also featured the Kenyan flag on T-shirts, bandanas and face masks. Corpses and coffins of those who were killed during this period were also draped by the Kenyan flag.

A key member of the ruling elite derisively characterised the revolt as the misguided "noises" of 'KFC-eating, Uber-riding privileged city dwellers'.⁵ The question that has been hardly raised or addressed, though, is: why did the Gen Z youth's parents seem to quietly support, and even agree with the protests' message? Answering this question enables us to identify another strategy used by Kenyan youth on TikTok to claim both agency and legitimacy for their cause: *self-reframing through a historical lens*. In Kenya some of the critical social changes have usually come about when the aggrieved poured into forests and streets, from Mau Mau and onwards to the multi-party struggles of the early 1990s that saw the entrenchment of *maandamano* as a fundamental avenue for challenging power. During the 2024 *maandamano*, news of human rights activists bailing out protestors from police cells enabled older people to see a link between the present and similar past movements.⁶ Also, the history of struggle was one that older Kenyans could identify with because they could recall, and many were part of, the processes that saw pro-change voices in universities, churches, cultural centers and other sites across Kenya that presented themselves and were taken as credible alternative spaces for political mobilization.

At the level of performance, videos that were shared and reshared accorded individuals an opportunity to write themselves into history. Tik Tok's space became, for Gen Z, an alternative cultural space that allowed them, through song and dance, to make and restate specific claims that attempted to reconstruct and call to question what they perceived to be a poor culture in Kenyan governance and politics. This platform not only allowed them to agitate for the reengineering of society, particularly around issues of governance, but also to make the government address critical issues like unemployment, the high cost of living, and the lack of accountability from public officials. Videographic self-presentation of individuals expressing their positions was an important way of documenting their own contribution to national discourse, an important consideration in a society where, in the youth's perceptions, leaders often assume that young people are disinterested in public affairs, or, at best, those in power simply ignore them. Making oneself visible and actively present in the performance of their own life stories is crucial to the process of documenting social history. This self-telling was made more vibrant by vigorous dancing to the three songs and it not only injected life into the protests but also presented students of performance with evidence of the changing nature of texts and genres--creating tight connections between composition, modes of telling, audiences, and technology--within specific historical contexts.⁷ How people define themselves and want to be seen by others counts in the wielding of power; it is necessary to understand how Kenyan Gen Z frame themselves and their cause.

At another level, Tik Tok texts helped consolidate a self-defined youth identity in order to focus better on their cause. Their 'tribeless, leaderless, fearless' self-tag was a crucial way of undermining ideologies of ethnicity that have hitherto defined Kenyan politics and access to power through a patronage system presided over by a Big Man backed by a huge ethnic voting bloc.⁸ By adopting the Reggae-style '*Reject De Bill*' song, Kenyan youth symbolically aligned their grievances and aspirations to those of a global movement for social justice, of which Roots Reggae has been a significant voice, suggesting a transnational alliance of people struggling against power elites they see as corrupt. Thus, by linking themselves to the broad history of struggle against bad governance, these youth found allies beyond Kenya; actors in Hollywood came out to shoot Tik Tok videos as they danced to '*Anguka Nayo*' in support of the protests [5]. Available literature on the subject reveals that social media has served as a platform for marginalized and voiceless

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⁵2024. Nation. <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/ichung-wah-dismisses-gen-z-protesters-as-kfc-eating-uber-riding-privileged-city-dwellers-4665380>, June 21. Accessed August 25, 2024.

⁶Former Chief Justice Willie Mutunga was one such activist.

⁷On framing in popular culture see for instance Wa Mungai (2008) '*Made in Riverwood*': (dis) locating identities and power through Kenyan pop music. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 20 (1).

⁸ See Wa Mungai, M.(2010). *Iconic representations of identities in Kenyan Cultures*. Wa Mungai, M and Gona, G. (Re)membering Kenya: Identity Culture and Freedom Vol.1. Twaweza Communications, Nairobi, pp.72-93.

individuals to express their opinions, connect with others, and engage in political activities.⁹ Indeed, the complex space of social media platforms and their evolving integration within social and political contexts demonstrates the interplay between technological structures and social, cultural, and political dimensions.¹⁰ Viewed within this complexity, Gen Z are not a subaltern category; they are, rather, a demographic with a powerful voice that can be forcefully deployed through digital mediation to alter the shape and direction of Kenyan socio-political life.

Tik Tok was used to spread among the protesters a critical narrative that played out in the open, as a hidden transcript, but one that simultaneously and ironically operated below the radar of state security agencies to organize youth action, thereby catching many by surprise when protestors eventually stormed into parliament buildings on 25th June 2024¹¹. Additionally, it is notable that by choosing to watch, re-watch, like, share or comment on a specific protest, Tik Tok videos utilizing the three songs cited here, online audiences became active members of a digitally-constituted social collective, thereby influencing the course of the protests in certain ways. For a state with such a deep level of state surveillance as Kenya's--as alleged police abductions and forced disappearances of youth during and after the protests amply demonstrate¹²--Tik Tok was felt to be a safe space for Kenyan Gen Z through which they could call out those in power, for instance by ridiculing state officials perceived to have a penchant for ostentatious display of riches alleged to have been corruptly gained. Below we turn to examine briefly how digital culture is used to reconfigure Kenyan public space.

Remaking public culture: Digital spaces and social power

Culture's malleability and flexibility has offered those excluded from mainstream forms of power an avenue through which to challenge stereotypical images of themselves by remaking and actively promoting the signifiers of their contemporary cultural identities.¹³ This flexibility, especially in popular culture, allows individuals to challenge the reproduction of authoritarian power. As a platform for cultural expression and social activism, Tik Tok plays a crucial role, engaging the audience in ongoing struggles for cultural and political change. Within the context of the #Reject Finance Bill 2024 protests, Tik Tok audiences were made to feel engaged and part of the "movement for change."¹⁴ The sound tracks appropriated by the movement resonated with collective global concerns and the fight against social inequalities, youth unemployment and the lack of government accountability. Outside digital space in Kenya, especially among members of earlier generations (Gen X and Baby Boomers), there is a perceived mainstream culture of silence, a lack of outrage, which in turn becomes complicit in and reinforces the excesses of the state; ironically the protestors of the 1990s are seen as largely having been co-opted into a corrupt political culture. However, within online spaces, especially among Millennials and Gen Z, this non-protest culture is being questioned, and the silence built into mainstream society's protocols of politeness identified as a refusal to hold power to account. '*Anguka Nayo*', '*Reject De Bill*', and '*Freedom is Coming Tomorrow*' are the organizing soundtracks for the articulation of protestors' grievances; the accompanying dance challenge, sometimes quite vigorous and torturous unlike the generally languorous style preferred by older generations, becomes a marker of defiance. For these texts to perform their functions, they had to articulate broader concerns of the youth globally, and this aptly explains the localization of tunes and memes appropriated from global circuits of popular culture. Another reason the Kenyan protests resonated globally was that authoritarian culture is a worldwide issue. In any case, autocrats establish their undemocratic rule within the frameworks of culture, just as those who consider themselves marginalized challenge it using culture.¹⁵ As a rule, the global authoritarian upsurge is systematically linked to culturally shared beliefs about the relationship between the leader and the people that form and control the public sphere. The resulting hegemonic culture props practices perceived to be undemocratic and that ought to be questioned and challenged by alternative, ignored voices, as Kenya's Gen Z demonstrated.

⁹Mutie, S. (2021). *Femicide and Judging Social Media as an Alternative Online Court in Kenya. Gender, Judging and the Courts in Africa Selected Studies*. Routledge, pp. 79-98.

¹⁰Xie, M. (2024). *The platformation and transformation of the digital public sphere: An introduction*. In *Communication and the Public*, Vol. 9(1) 31-35.

¹¹For a detailed discussion of the workings of public transcripts see Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press.

¹²Protestors alleged that some Telcos sabotaged internet access in order to curtail the use of social media in Kenya during the protests [6].

¹³Conradie, A. (2013). *Remaking Culture for Sale: The Strategic Commodification, Construction and Performance of 'Traditional' Cultural Identity in South African Cultural Villages*. In Daniel Boswell, Roger O'Shea, and Efrat Inculturalism: *Meaning and Identity*, Brill, pp. 65-76

¹⁴Pearlman, W. (2024). '*Authoritarianism and Culture*', in Anne Wolf (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Authoritarian Politics* (online edn, Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198871996.013.44>, accessed 5 Aug. 2024.

¹⁵Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. International Publishers, New York.



Overall, it might be argued that dissemination of the protests on TikTok and the use of popular culture memes suffused with political meanings was an attempt at both undermining Kenyan mainstream culture's hegemonic control of the public sphere and rewriting the norms of participation in public life. There was considerable success on both counts. Art on TikTok was used to successfully challenge the grip on power by Kenya's political class; the convenience and universal availability of Tik Tok as social space greatly aided this. Tik Tok, blurring as it does boundaries of ethnicity, class, and gender, and linking past to present, was a potent force that even the might of government was unable to clamp down on.

Conclusion

The use of Tik Tok provides evidence of how pop music in digital space can be used to push for social change, work as an archive of cultural memory and its contestation and be a powerful cultural and political tool. Songs were used as counter-cultural questioning of some assumptions about the Kenyan public sphere; Gen Z protesters felt that freedom had not come even after the Kenya Kwanza government had been in power for nearly two years. Hence, texts such as *'Anguka Nayo'* [7-18], *'Reject De Bill'* [19-31], and *'Freedom Is Coming Tomorrow'* [32-42] have been used to express rejection of not only a law they saw as being unjust but also a political system seen to purvey exclusionary practices to favor a few and disadvantage the majority. Employing these songs as sounds of protest on Tik Tok highlights the intersections of culture and politics in Kenya and underscores the role of popular music in bridging the gap between entertainment, activism and the reconstitution of the public sphere into a space.

We set out to demonstrate how TikTok enables a rethinking and even extension of Habermas' conception of the public sphere as consensus-aided. Use of Tik Tok shows how counter-cultural publics and practices work by subverting the consensus into which citizens feel to have been coerced by the power elite and its institutions and, instead, inveigling a different set of ideas upon public consciousness. By examining Kenyan youth's deployment of Tik Tok music videos, we have shown how citizens have attempted to redefine the relationship between themselves and those they see as corrupt wielders of power. A few weeks into the protests, Gen Z vociferously rejected the Kenyan president's summons for dialogue at Bomas of Kenya and instead 'summoned' him to their virtual meeting on X; this was a practical demonstration of the dominated rewriting the power relations between themselves and their dominators[43]. While it is true that Kenyan youth still remain invisible in appointments to public offices even after the *maandamano*, the ruling elite clearly recognizes and acknowledges that they are a powerful voice that can no longer be ignored. Indeed, the Kenyan president has recently adopted a town hall meeting strategy where he has been directly engaging the youth on different topics [44]. For whatever it is ultimately worth, this might be cited as a tangible dividend for Gen Z--summoning the most powerful person in the land to personally appear in public spaces where his government often receives a tongue-lashing first-hand. Further to this it might be argued that through TikTok, the youth have reclaimed their agency and somewhat dethroned the authoritarianism of the power elite, however nominally, by reshaping the idea of the public sphere. During the protests Kenyan youth recuperated old tunes such as Juliani's '*Sitasimama*' and adopted new ones as a rallying cry against punitive government policies, demanding accountability, transparency and social justice. By resituating popular memes and tunes on TikTok, Kenyan youth unsettled and have laid bare the cultural and moral dimensions of exercising political power. With its unique ability to operate outside of the control of mainstream culture and media regulation TikTok has helped to expose the underbelly of Kenya's political culture, a vital step in attempts to reshape the Kenyan public sphere into a democratic space.

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Notes

- [1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fgksUGOqWv8>
- [2] <https://www.tiktok.com/@soundbreezetv/video/7382663071698914565>
- [3] <https://www.tiktok.com/@wakilnews/video/7385856840749387013>
- [4] <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/anguka-nayo-protest>
- [5] <https://www.tiktok.com/@dave.were/video/7392199444608994566>
- [6] <https://www.msn.com/en-xl/africa/kenya/safaricom-comments-on-anti-finance-bill-protests-uproar-over-internet-outage/ar-BB1oVsUD>
- [7-18] <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/anguka-nayo-protest>
- [19-31] <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/reject-the-bill-song-by-sir-newson>
- [32-42] <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/freedom-is-coming-finance-bill>
- [43] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-furBHHWHs>
- [44] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6HfA0PAHOM>



#ZakayoShuka:

An analysis of language used during the Gen Z Protests in Kenya

Joyce Omwoha

Kenya's president William Ruto's plan to sign the controversial Finance Bill 2024, which includes tax increases aimed at raising more than \$2.7 billion in revenue for the government's Ksh 4.2 trillion (\$30.6 billion) 2024 - 25 budget led to online campaigns, and later to street demonstrations that demanded for changes in government. The protesters demanded a lifestyle audit of flashy state officers, a review of salaries of members of parliament (MPs), reduced taxes in sanitary wear, job opportunities for the youth, reduced wastage of public funds by government officials, and called for the abolishment of funding to offices of the first and second lady. The demonstrations (dubbed Gen Z demonstrations) birthed the most popular phrase in Kenya currently: 'Anguka nayo' from hit song 'Anguka Nayo' by Wadagliz's.

'Anguka nayo' gained prominence during the anti-government protests where Gen Z's adopted it as a form of resistance to encourage individuals and groups of people to take a stand, no matter the risk or consequence. The courage imparted to the youth through slogans such as 'team courage' and 'anguka nayo' saw digital etiquette, an expectation from citizens engaging on digital media, not to be a priority as Kenyans openly used unfiltered language to pass messages across. Insults and name calling, seemingly acceptable and normalised, has been used to belittle and ridicule the president and his MPs. 'Anguka nayo' encourages the young people to speak up and expose corruption by the current government. It urges them to marshal courage and liberty to speak up and make descriptions of their leaders' conduct. Unfortunately, this courage has become a barrier to 'respectful' communication with social media platforms becoming spaces for unfiltered expression.

Kenya's President William Ruto is commonly referred to as 'Zakayo'. Zakayo is a Swahili name similar to Zacchaeus, a tax collector in the Bible, known as a corrupt individual, and his viciousness in collecting taxes from the public and adding wealth to himself despite him having more than enough. When referring to him as Zakayo, the citizens have openly described him as a selfish person who has chosen wealth to the expense of human relationships. Many times, he has been asked why he is increasing tax in a country where billions are lost in corruption.

'Zakayo Shuka' (Zacchaeus come down) holds two meanings: first, the citizens are asking the president (Zakayo) to reduce/bring down the taxes he has imposed on them and secondly, it also means that the president (Zakayo) should step down from his position because, following all the accusations, he is not fit for office. President Ruto seems to have embraced the name, justifying that his method is meant to get Kenya out of debt, but the question that Kenyans beg is, does the president care about their well-being or only that of his friends whom he seems to be spending taxpayers' money with?

During the Gen Z demonstrations, online sentiments stating "Ruto ni mwizi" (Ruto is a thief) and hashtag #Rutonimwizi prevailed. Mwizi, a derogatory word, which simply means a dishonest person, and extortionist who takes things from people wrongfully or by force. I asked a group of Gen Z protesters why they had chosen to use such language and the specific word -thief in the affirmative. The first response was "where is the lie?" I responded

by stating that all that we hear are allegations. They retorted by stating that Mr. Ruto has been accused on several occasions, with evidence, for stealing from government coffers, acquiring public land by using dubious means, and using tax payers money for expensive travel expenses where the President had been accused of travelling with family and friends to official events, and being at the centre of the maize and fertilizer scandals.

The Gen Z respondents reminded me of another phrase they used to address the president, “we are not our parents”, making reference to the millennials, Gen X, etc who they refer to as cowards. I, a millennial sat back and thought about the language used during these protests. A few years ago, the millennials up to the octogenarians believed in respecting elders and not using disrespectful language while addressing them. Such words used with the Gen Z would never be heard in public spaces. The Gen Z on the other hand, believe that respect is earned, and they argue that a thief is a thief and should be addressed as one.

The Cabinet Secretaries, Governors, Senators, Members of the county Assembly (MCA) and MPs were not spared either. Insults against them included ‘MPigs’ with dummy pigs paraded on the streets to represent MPs. The use of pigs is a symbol of greed, because pigs eat to no satisfaction. The MPs have been called greedy because they supported the contentious Finance Bill 2024. Anger and frustration built up when the youth realized that the MPs betrayed them by allegedly receiving Kshs. 2M each to vote YES for the Finance Bill. Other issues that led to anger and frustration is MPs constant demand for increased pay perks and allowances, using government funds for personal projects. Public utterances around their conduct popularized hash-tags like #MPigs, and slogans like “we elected robbers, not leaders” the youth accused the MPs of not representing the interests of citizens but the interests of the political class; citing instances where the Constituency Development Funds (CDFs) meant for social-economic development of the people at the constituency level went unaccounted for, leaving the constituency members without bursaries, hence many youth languishing at home. The insults moved from online to MPs personal mobile phones. Their phone numbers were leaked and disgruntled youth bombarded them with offensive phone calls and texts. Some MPs were publicly insulted and physically attacked. The above is a clear illustration that frustrations within society leads to harmful debates coupled by derogatory terms by the offended to the accused.

Is ‘Anguka Nayo’ a blessing or a curse? Is the courage too much? How much is enough?

The digital space goes unmoderated, hence poor practice of good online etiquette. If practiced, moderation helps create a positive and respectful digital environment for everyone.

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#RageAndCourage: The Revolution was Televised and the President Watched it

Joseph Obel

One of the things that led to our rage and courage was when David Ndii, an economic advisor to President Ruto, called Gen Zs “digital wankers”. I read that infamous opinion on X with mixed feelings. I reposted and quoted many reposts and quotes that challenged this opinion. How can a grandfather, in his right mind, descend on his grandchildren with such contempt? That opinion was, in my view, representing Ndii’s fear of losing the privilege of being a member of the Kenyan political class. Then Finance Bill 2024 happened. I could not take it!

I’ve grown up with everyone older than me calling me lazy, saying all I ever want is to sit pretty, wallow on the streets of TikTok and Instagram, take selfies and rock the latest *luku*. In my reality, I’ve been trying to fight the system set to see me fall seven times. From school, I endured the 8:4:4 system of education that always conditioned my thinking and behaviour. I have been suicidal most of my life as I go through each day trying to be understood. I have endured a lack of apprenticeship, continuous search for and failure to secure attachment or internship opportunities in government and the private sector. I have braced up for and checked out of stifling corporate slavery. As I was trying to figure it all out, I learned that the *#FinanceBill2024* aims at whatever I have and yet hope to possess. I am enraged and anxious.

I go online and realise it’s not only me. We are also many. We use the only tools at our disposal, mobile phones and the internet. We mobilise each other. Contrary to the expectations of David Ndii and other skeptical parents, grandparents, and Gen X, we finally stand up for ourselves. The adults before us, we believe, have always been complacent and lukewarm. We think they always offered the government the other cheek to slap and an extra plate and fork to keep eating. We felt we are different. We are everything we think we are. We come out in large numbers; *#occupythestreets*, in our different colors, heights, hairstyles, lags, and chant, *#RutoMustGo*. We say *#TukoWengi*, *#ZakayoShuka*. We remind all the generations that have been before us, the sympathizers of despots, Mpigs, and tribal bigots, that we are leaderless, partyless, fearless, and tribeless. Just for the record, these protests are proudly sponsored by the incompetent and tone-deaf national government.

Tuesday, June 18th, 2024: Of things, we didn’t warn you about

Over the weekend, X, TikTok, and Instagram were all abuzz with the *#FinanceBil2024* *#Reject FinanceBill2024* and the counter to GoK sponsored hashtag, *#RejectFinanceBil2024* is meant to deface our legit hashtags. Boniface Mwangi shared a video of him at the parliament gates, reminding us that this is the place where our oppression is cooked. The MPigs gloat that they will vote YES. The ayes must have it. They have canvassed the country in their sun-roofed SUVs and updated us on their X and Instagram. Leadership is about openness and we should thank them for openly letting us know their stance on pocketing some hundreds of thousands or *kidogo* millions of Kenyan shillings as a thank-you-in-advance-for-passing the beloved Finance Bill 2024. Whatever happens in a pigsty remains in a pigsty. *Ama namna gani?* At least celebrities like Adelle Onyango, Janet Mbugua, Just Ivy, Kasmuel McOure, Mike



Muchiri and organisations like Civic Rise, Bunge La Mayut, and Msema Kweli have started interpreting the draconian Finance Bill into our local languages for us, the people. We must deeply invest our time to understand this. We, The People.

We come out in the streets. #ZakayoShuka. The police join us not to provide security but to breach it in the best way possible. It takes us between a few minutes to hours for our bodies to acclimatise with the teargas and the gender-reveal pink pungent water cannons. And bullets, both rubber and live. They might have heard but we inject again, and again, and again; #TukoWengi, #ZakayoShuka #StopKillingUs Go! We make a statement. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

Thursday June 20th: Gotha Tena

Fearless, leaderless, tribeless, and powerful gen Z comrade who recreated the iconic Rio De Janeiro statue of Jesus probably wasn't aware of how far it would go and how it would inspire even more Gen Zs and millennials to keep up the fight. This day we are more than last time. We have occupied the internet and the streets of Nairobi and other cities in Kenya. #SasaTusinyeshe? #ZakayoShuka, IMF we're not our parents, We Will f**@ with You. We're holding these against the cameras pointed at us by local and international media. Larry Madowo is with us every step of the way. They throw the teargas canisters, we grab and hurl back to them, serving while hot. Tribeless and powerful ones holding and throwing back the teargas at them. We are making a statement. They push us far away from Parliament, the den of MPigs. The war rages on the internet. This night they gun down Rex Maasai. It's so painful. His mistake? How dare he, how dare he go on the street and demand for good leadership and accountability? How dare he participate in a peaceful protest? Why is he jobless and poor yet he's an engineering graduate? Can't he sit at home and wait to challenge this government in the next general elections? After all 2027 is just three years away! What is wrong with Gen Z!?

They meet for the 3rd reading and pass the Bill. The MPigs vote yes while all their employers, us, watch them from the fences of the parliament buildings. They are legislators. Making and passing laws is their business. *Hebu Gen Zs wakae kando kwanza.*

A time for loss. Lives. Followers. Dignity. Of all parliamentarians, Karen Nyamu seems to have

had the highest loss. She claimed to have lost 10,000 followers online! Y'all baddies ain't loyal. We've lost tens of Gen Z lives. Why are we so unfair to Nyamu, the president, and every other politician and corruption beneficiary? *Aki Gen Zs, mnafaa mkuje tuongee!*

The only dialog we want is, *#RejectBudgetedCorruption*, *#StopAbductingUs*, and *#StopKillingUs*. We must *#OccupyEveryWhere*. This is not only a Nairobi-based Gen Z fight but one that extends countrywide. Nakuru, Kisumu, Nyeri, Eldoret, Embu, Meru, Mombasa, Kakamega, Machakos, and Garissa.

They fire at us in Githurai 45. The world is sleeping while we're dropping dead on the roads and in Mama Mboga *kibandas*. We paint the town red with our blood. Our mothers will forget how to wail when they wake up *kesho*. Maybe mummy will speak to camera and say how she feels about my loss, but not her disappointment at the government she voted for on August 8, 2022 at 4 am. Dear mum, I died fighting for you. May it pay off.

Tuesday June 25th, 2024: The People Shall, not May | *#TotalShutdownKenya #OccupyEverywhere #OccupyParliament*

Beba flag, mask, maji na firimbi. #RageAndCourage #RutoMustGo #RejectHioBill #AngukaNayo #OccupyParliament #TukoWengi #RutoMustGo #TotalShutdown #OccupyEverywhere

Business unusual. March to Parliament. It's risky. Gunshot symphonies. Numbness on every skin, thanks to the pink, green and colourless water cannons that reek of pungent uric acid. Do they have enough bullets? *Tuko wengi sana*. There are no matatus. Or ride-hailing services like Ubers. So, Nairobi town is actually not far from Juja, Ngong, or Embakasi on foot? *Tuko Wengi*. We are many. Thika Road. Ngong Road. Mombasa Road. Jogoo Road. Juja Road. Waiyaki Way. Northern Bypass. Eastern Bypass. Southern Bypass. All filled. By us. We walk. We can always walk. For our cause. We come in peace. They scatter our bodies into pieces.

Every time we inch closer and closer to the parliament grounds, the police fire at us. Until they can't fire anymore. An anticipation of rage and courage like this was not on their list of things considered in the things to watch out from Wananchi in 2024. Usually, we only fight on keyboards, then exhaustion, silence, and "on to the next" *Wanyamaze na waendelea na maisha*.

Tuko wengi! You can't kill us all. We storm the parliament buildings. We want to "greet" our dishonourable members of parliament in their dungeon. They can run! They disappear into the tunnel. We appear in the assembly. The sniper on the parliament building guns down a few of us. We cover our fallen heroes with the national flag and carry them to the nearby ambulances. This place reeks of death and victory. We've won. The town is burning. Our bodies are burning. The president calls us treasonous criminals. We The People. We shall exercise our democratic rights as per Article 37. Assembly. Demonstration. Picketing. Petition. You will arrest the more vocal amongst us, accuse them of being our leaders, and point fingers to some organizations for funding us. But fail to see that our rage and courage are proudly sponsored by your acts of impunity, human rights violations, lies, and extravagant Kaunda suits. *The President Declines to Assent The 2024, Sends it to Parliament for...* A dangling carrot. Imagine the MPigs lauded the president for rejecting the Finance Bill which they tyrannically voted YES. *Yaani hata hawajaskia vibaya?* The Devil Wears ... and it's just a matter of time.

Joseph Obel is a writer, theatre producer, film director, performance artist, and mental health advocate. He has written for Jahazi Vol. 10, reviewed theatre for Sinema Focus Ke, and independently critiqued the arts on his blog, Tukio Sanaa. Obel also served as a scriptwriter for The XYZ Show by Buni Media and is currently a member of the Dramatists Guild of America.



Too Early for Birds: Storytelling as a revolutionary force

Faith Oneya

One on one with Mugambi Nthiga, Too Early for Birds writer and director

In their latest theatre production on one of the founding fathers of the Republic of Kenya, Tom Mboya, Too Early for Birds (TEFB) intertwined bits of recent Gen Z-led demonstrations with a theatrical retelling of Kenyan history, captivating the audience with its unique rendition. Founded in 2017 by former advertising professionals turned thespians Abu Sense and Ngartia, TEFB is renowned for its innovative and engaging approach to historical narratives, consistently illuminating overlooked and untold stories from Kenya's past.

Mugambi Nthiga, a TEFB writer and director, spoke to *Jahazi* about its evolution and why storytelling can be a revolutionary force.

Tell us a bit about yourself and your journey into storytelling and theatre?

I'm a storyteller, filmmaker, actor, writer, and director. My professional journey started back in 2003 when theatre was the dominant scene, and there wasn't much happening on screen in terms of TV series or films. My first performance was in the stage version of *Sarafina*, which had previously been performed only in Johannesburg and New York. The Nairobi production was monumental, with Leleti Khumalo, the original Sarafina, attending our premiere. From then on, I knew this was what I wanted to do. I've since transitioned from acting to also writing and directing for both stage and screen.

How did Too Early for Birds come to life?

The idea was birthed by Abu Sense and Ngartia, who were inspired by a blog written by Owaahh. He had done extensive research into Kenya's history, uncovering a wealth of untold stories. Abu and Ngartia wanted to take these narratives, which were hidden in the dusty archives of our country, and present them in an engaging, theatrical format. I encouraged them to leave their advertising jobs and follow their passion. Shortly after, they staged the first Too Early for Birds show, which focused on lesser-known luminaries from Kenyan history.

It has grown into not just an entertaining storytelling event and theatre event but has been referred to by many as the finest history, the Kenyan history class they've ever attended.

What sets Too Early for Birds apart from other theatrical performances in Kenya?

First and foremost, the research. We spend months, sometimes years, digging through archives, interviewing family members of historical figures, and piecing together an accurate but also vibrant portrayal of our past. For example, during our recent production on Tom Mboya, we had invaluable contributions from his granddaughter, Michelle Mboya. She brought a fresh perspective and provided crucial details that even her mother, Tom Mboya's daughter, didn't focus on.

The storytelling in *Too Early for Birds* is fun and funky, incorporating pop culture references, music, dance, and reenactments. It's not just about delivering facts but making history accessible and exciting for younger generations. We present these stories with flair, from the viewpoint of today's youth, which I believe resonates with audiences in a way traditional history classes cannot.

Speaking of history, why do you think it's so important to tell these stories now?

Kenya's history has many blanks, especially in the official versions we were taught in school. We aim to fill in those blanks and provide a more complete picture of who we are and where we come from. In our plays, the history is not just a backdrop; it's the foundation. We explore the lives of historical figures in-depth, their dreams, struggles, and the significant events they were part of.

History is fundamental in our work. If it weren't important, why would our education system and government work so hard to keep it away from people? History helps us understand where we came from, where we are, and where we're going. Unfortunately, our education system sanitizes key historical figures like politicians and the founding family, and often overlooks the nuances. This is why we focus on telling the unfiltered history of Kenya. For instance, many don't know about the concentration camps the British set up during the colonial period. My own father and aunt spent time in one of these reserves, yet I didn't learn about it until I was in my 40s. It's vital that we know both the good and bad sides of our history. Without that, we're disconnected from who we really are.

Our shows reveal lesser-known parts of Kenyan history. For example, our production "Brazen" focused on important women who shaped the country but are often sidelined. We spotlight figures like Field Marshal Muthoni, Zarina Patel, and Wangari Maathai—people integral to Kenya's history but usually overshadowed by men. Similarly, *Too Early for Birds* has also delved into the notorious criminals of Kenya's past with a show called "Badassari," which explored the country's crime history through figures like Ashosho and Anogo. By telling these stories, we challenge the sanitized versions of history that have been fed to us for years.

In 2019, TEFB staged the first Tom Mboya show. What sparked the idea for this show, and how was it received by the audience?

The Tom Mboya show was created to mark 50 years since his assassination in 1969. Mboya was a very prominent politician and trade unionist in Kenya, and his death changed the course of our political landscape. Initially, the show was supposed to be a small tribute at the Rusinga Festival, but as we started digging into his life, we realized his story deserved more. The research grew, and the show eventually became too big for Rusinga Island. Instead, we staged it as a full-fledged *Too Early for Birds* production, imagining an alternate reality where Mboya had lived. What kind of Kenya would we have today if his life hadn't been cut short? It resonated deeply with people because it explored what Kenya could have been if we had more leaders like Mboya—leaders who prioritised governance, accountability, and the well-being of the people.

Let's travel back to 1969 for a moment. What was the political climate like then, and how does it compare to 2019? Are there any significant similarities or differences?

I'm not a historian, but from what I know, 1969 was a critical year for Kenya. The country was only six years old as an independent nation, and five years into becoming a republic.

However, by 1969, it was clear that the path Kenya was on wasn't ideal. The deals that facilitated our independence weren't truly for the people; they benefited the elites and those in power. Corruption, greed, and the pursuit of power and land were rampant. This led J.M. Kariuki to famously predict that Kenya would become a country of "ten millionaires and ten million beggars." Fast forward to 2019, and we see an even more skewed situation: a few billionaires, but millions of impoverished citizens.

In both 1969 and 2019, we see seeds of the same issues – inequality, a disconnect between the ruling class and the masses, and government-controlled narratives. In 1969, state-owned media shaped how Kenyans perceived their country. Today, while we have more media options, the level of surveillance and control, especially through technology, is much more sophisticated.

You mentioned the brutal state in 1969. How does this manifest in 2019?

While the tactics have evolved, the underlying brutality remains. In 1969, dissent was met with force—leaders were assassinated, and opposition voices were silenced. The most notable example is Tom Mboya, who was gunned down in broad daylight. The trial that followed was a circus, with many holes in the story and witnesses who eventually disappeared.

In 2019, the state's control is more subtle but just as pervasive. Surveillance is everywhere—through our phones, online activities, and even the content we consume. We're constantly being monitored, and the tools of control, like social media and endless entertainment, keep people distracted and subdued. The brutality isn't always physical, but it's still there, keeping people in survival mode and preventing real change.

What's the impact of telling these stories on younger generations?

Many young people don't know these parts of history because they've been erased or diminished in the official narratives. For instance, in *Badassari*, we explored the lives of notorious criminals not to glorify them but to show that Kenya's history is full of complex characters. By understanding where we came from, young people can make more informed choices about the future. The show on Tom Mboya, for example, helped the audience, especially the youth, reflect on the current state of our country and wonder, "What if things had been different?"

The Tom Mboya show was staged again in 2024, marking 55 years since his assassination. Was this timing coincidental, or did you find inspiration in the recent Gen Z protests?

It's a mix of both. The decision to bring back the Tom Mboya show wasn't entirely coincidental, but it wasn't planned in response to the Gen Z protests. After the success of the first production, we had always hoped to stage it again. Initially, we wanted to open the show on July 5, 2024, to mark the exact 55th anniversary of Mboya's assassination. However, due to time and budget constraints, we moved the show to August.

Interestingly, while we were planning the show, Kenya was experiencing a major shift. The first Maandamano (protest) happened in June 2024, with young people—mostly Gen Z—leading a countrywide movement against the Finance Bill. This generation is no longer willing to "move on" or keep their heads down. They're fighting back in ways we haven't seen before, and by the time we began rehearsals, Kenya had changed dramatically.

It goes without saying that the Kenya of 2024 is vastly different from the one we presented in the 2019 production. We had to adapt the show to reflect the current realities. While the structure remained largely the same, the point of view shifted. In 2019, the show was more of a "what if" scenario—what if the leadership of that time had taken Kenya in a different direction?

But in 2024, it became a story about revolution. The protests, the resistance, and the uprising we're seeing now mirror the revolutionary spirit of Mboya's era. Kenyans today, especially the youth, are proving that the fight for justice and equality is far from over. In many ways, they embody the same revolutionary DNA that Mboya had when he began his political journey at such a young age. He was only 33 when Kenya gained independence, and now we see young people in their 20s and 30s leading movements for change.

To what do you attribute the success of the production?

The success of the Tom Mboya production goes beyond just good performances or direction. It was a collective effort. We had an amazing group of actors, a dedicated technical and artistic crew, and producers who believed in the project. We managed to sell out five performances in an 800-seat auditorium, with each show lasting four hours. People stayed for the entire performance because the story resonated deeply with them. It wasn't just about entertainment—it was about awakening something in our audiences, whether that was through laughter, tears, or reflection on Kenyan identity and history.


You've described Tom Mboya as a revolutionary. Do you see parallels between his leadership and the current youth movements?

Absolutely. Tom Mboya was a trailblazer. By the time he was in his early 20s, he was already making significant moves within the Kenya African Union (KAU). He saw a vacuum in leadership during the state of emergency when many leaders were imprisoned, and he stepped up to fill it. At just 33 years old, he was a key figure in post-independence Kenya, pushing for a vision of the country that prioritized equality and social justice.


The youth today are similarly stepping into leadership roles, realizing that the older generation has failed to bring about the change Kenya desperately needs. They're not waiting for permission—they're demanding accountability and leading protests against corruption and inequality. Just like Mboya, they understand that revolution isn't a one-time event—it's an ongoing process, and it requires constant vigilance and action.

The 2024 production of Tom Mboya is about revolution, and that's the key message. The fight for justice and equality is ongoing, and we must continue to challenge the systems that oppress us. The brutality of the state hasn't changed—it's just taken on new forms. But the revolutionary spirit that existed in Mboya's time is still alive today, and it's up to us to nurture it. I hope audiences walk away with a sense of urgency. Kenya is at a tipping point, and the youth are showing us the way forward. It's time for all of us to recognize that the fight isn't over and that we have a role to play in shaping the future of our country. Revolution is not a choice; it's a necessity.

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The Unbowed Gen Z Movement

Ann Wahome

"Unaingia kazi kesho ama unaenda maandamano?" asked my boss as I left the office on Monday evening. You see, there are many things I never thought possible. One of them is having an off day to protest. The second one would be seeing over a million passionate, tribe-less, leaderless, and fearless youths in the streets for a common cause: good governance, accountability, and an end to corruption. But maybe that is why they say nobody knows tomorrow because who would have thought united youths would change Kenyan history? This is the power of the moment, the mindset, the unbowed Gen Z movement!

The Moment

At 24 years of age, I had never attended a protest until 18th June 2024. I will admit this was not the easiest decision I have made in my life. There was so much to consider especially the experiences I have seen on TV during other protests. I was afraid of getting injured, my mother mourning and never getting justice after my death, losing my friends, and being arrested. However, there was an undeniable courage and utmost faith from all the solidarity I had seen online. So on Monday evening, I made three calls. One to my boss about my absentia from work the next day, one to my mother who unbelievably supported my decision to protest but not without a few cautionary statements; *"ujichunge sana na usiende peke yako."* The next call was to my best friend confirming our meet-up time and point for the #rejectfinancebill protests.

There are things I did not know about myself and Kenyan youths until the 18th. One is that I could apply for the next athletic Olympics and maybe win a bronze because how could I run that fast? I also did not know that teargas might make you cry less if you use toothpaste for your eyes. A revolutionary finding if you ask me. If I was not present, not even the evidence in the news would convince me of the unity of Kenyan youths. You can imagine my bewilderment when I fell as we ran from the water canisters and was carried to safety by total strangers. *"Uko sawa?"* "Do you need water?" *"Aangalia kama ameumia?"* *"Umeangusha simu shika."* They might have thought the teargas was too strong for my eyes but in reality, it was the solidarity, the concern, and care from absolute strangers. It was probably because of them that I found myself in the same streets the next Tuesday on 25th with my water bottle, mask, and my almost finished toothpaste for my eyes.

The air tasted different on 25th August 2024. Despite being bright and sunny, there was an overwhelming darkness that I felt every time I breathed. Maybe it was after seeing that despite being peaceful protesters, we still lost two souls to police brutality. However, the #justiceforRex and online solidarity made me leave my house to practice my Olympic skills in the streets of Nairobi again. The cat and mouse game between police and protesters was the same as we tried to evade the teargas and the water canisters.

Everything changed in the afternoon when we heard gunshots from as far as Biashara Street. *"Watu wameoccupy parliament,"* was all I could hear. How? When? There were as many questions as there were gunshots and teargas. It truly felt like I was fighting against Wesley Snipes in an action movie. "They are shooting to kill." "Parliament is on fire." "The MPs are fleeing for



safety." "There are snipers." "They are deploying the military." There was suddenly so much information that my anxiety spiraled to its maximum. I held my friend's hand and requested him to take me home. As expected, there was no public transport vehicles and we had to walk from town to Westlands, not too far but very far for people who had been running since morning. When I got home, my heart broke. I cried. For the many souls we lost. For the abducted. For the injured. For Githurai. For the heartbroken mothers crying on TV. For what the police force has become. For the cruelty of our leaders. For a country I did not recognize anymore? Because in my country, innocent blood does not flow on streets, there are no scattered brains outside parliament, police do not kill children and protestors are not treasonous criminals, but they say you never know everything right?

The History-Making Gen Z Movement

Three weeks ago, I stood outside my usual 'mutura' base. As I waited for my turn in the night-only long queue, I could not help but overhear a random conversation between my 'mutura' guy and some customers. One comment spoke most to me, "*lakini Gen Z waliweza*." I smiled and in my introverted way chose not to engage so I took my usual and went home deep in thought. Gen Z had become a history-changing movement, I mean how do you explain over a million youths collectively sharing one cause? Over 1200 medics across the country volunteering to offer medical services to injured protesters in the Medics for Kenyans Initiative. Kenyans raising over 20 million in a day through the M-changa initiative for injured protesters? Hotels and well-wishers offering water and food to protesters. The collective courage of calling out the atrocities of our leaders. The love, the solidarity, the collective belief in a better country!

In the words of a beautiful Kenyan poet we all need to recognize, Mumbi Macharia, "The revolution will not be televised. The revolution will be on Instagram Live. The revolution will come in the form of hashtags." I am certain it was never in their manifesto to have the president on an X-space platform addressing protesters but the movement had different

plans. The movement has solidified the importance of technological advancement in Kenya. There have to be minimized memes on X and Instagram as people use the platforms for civic education. For the first time, we had the finance bill translated into different dialects for better comprehension of everyone in the country. Who would have thought the Gen Z movement would cause a cabinet reshuffle but here we are?

The Lingo

June and August 2024 have been a roller-coaster of emotions for all Kenyans. Some have been angry with our leaders. Others have been happy to be elected to government positions after years of opposing the government. Others are nursing injuries while others are still mourning their kin. Others are still looking for their relatives. However, the two months have also shown Kenyan talent in lingo. "Anguka nayo," has been the anthem for #rejectfinancebill. "Zakayo shuka." "How do you teargas a baddie?" "M-pigs" and my favorite of all times "mtukufu lies". The hashtags on social media platforms are hilarious, lifting the heavy burdens we carry collectively for our country.

The Gen Z movement marks a historic time in Kenyan history. Mau Mau fighters certainly took more than two months to drive colonialists out of our country. The journey to freedom has just began. I hope the collective anger we held on the 25th does not subside. We deserve better. We will get better. And lastly, may we never forget that when we lose our fear, they lose their power.

Anne Wahome is a Political Science and Public Administration graduate, a passionate poet, writer, and feminist committed to advocating for social change and equality in Kenya. In July 2024, she presented her work at the 2nd Performing Arts National Conference at the Kenya Cultural Center, where she discussed the role of the arts in driving social transformation.



Never Forget!

Cultural Production in Support of the June 2024 Maandamano

Nguye Mutere



This is a tribute to cultural producers. If ever there was a cataclysmic event for creative production in Kenya, it was the **#RejectFinanceBill #RutoMustGo #Maandamano** movement. Older generations of Kenyans had mastered silence, and the Gen Z castigated us for it. Clearly from Gen Z **#RejectFinanceBill** protests all the reticence to speak loudly for all to hear and know us as a collective is in the past. Gen Z unreservedly broke barriers and because the internet never forgets there is a corpus of our lives stored there in various forms. My bookmarks and memes folder are bursting at the seams with memes, pictures, videos, and songs, all rendered because of *Maandamano*. Artists and creators making meaning of our lives. By the time the People's Archive¹ was crowdsourcing artefacts for public access and research in earnest, participants submitted the required three items indicating their provenance as best as possible. Granted I can submit again! It was equivalent to being asked to name my favourite songs ever or better yet name my favourite child. The point is, we witnessed a proliferation of cultural products that could/would become heritage. Many a time our senses went into overwhelm and society was cautioned to make sure that individually we were taking care of our mental health. It was Arundhati Roy's covid Portal all over again. There were earnest remonstrations asking us to take time to debrief, breathe, take care of ourselves and step away from the screen. It was not just the creatives who went into overdrive; a hyper-production mode was in place in a time and place where concepts, ideas, sketches, prototypes, and animations were being crafted. Incredible comedic skits, music produced and iconic photographs such as Rio de *Kanairo*² were posted on diverse digital media platforms.

¹The People's Archive - Kenya <https://peoplesarchive.ke/> put out a public call crowdsourcing citizens digital and physical materials for an archive commemorating GenZ protests



²Research shows that the cited image was, in fact, adopted from a 2015 folk festival in Hammarby, Sweden. Its widespread circulation and appropriation as part of the Kenyan Gen Z movement iconography evokes the initially festive, carnival-like mood of the *maandamano* movement that changed drastically with time, following the government's harsh response. The tag *Rio de KaNairo* is wordplay on the iconic Christ The Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro that stands with outstretched arms over the city.

Fig 2 *Rio de KaNairo* a protestor mounted atop the traffic lights in Nairobi's CBD taken from several social media users

At the same time, Kenyans cried, were in rage then cried again, as keyboard activists changed profile pictures to a raised fist and other expressions of protest. Creatives took time to crank out Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated uniform concepts for Kenya's Paris Olympic team demanding accountability for travel funding, as well as a list of state officials representing the country in France. Activists wept, seeking refuge in mosques and eventually churches to escape the violent state response and tear gas, to bury the fallen. Young protesters were incarcerated only to get back out to protest in three-piece suits. Digital access to Kenyan lives and our views of the world were the unfettered real-time display on screens across the world, until the US Election spectacle put a polite full stop to international attention to Kenya's social and political fight for justice.

The *maandamano* exhibitionary complex was quintessentially a collection representing the local gaze through (per)formances, observation, discussion, anime, song productions, which served as both catharsis and response. The process concurrently comprised of an organisation and a cataloguing of these intangible and tangible materialities. We were witnessing the formation of a Kenyan aesthetics, shaping the production of collateral, while our cultural creative Industry was in full throttle. This collection was indeed what Stuart Hall termed as the constitution of a living archive, an organic form that, theoretically, represented a praxis of decoloniality. This word, distinct from decolonization was coined in 1990 by Annibal Quijano, a Peruvian scholar. According to Walter Mignolo, colonialism was over and the cold war was an episode of the past. However, coloniality is, we argue, very much alive and with us, causing a crisis. A global crisis mode every now and then has us living out reality in full colour, the dimensions of which allow us to take a retrospective look within as a young global south democracy.

This archive building process pushes us to avoid being silent as we will need a time capsule to remember *Maandamano* events as they occurred in real time; to remember a precise and clear account as the moments, though rapid, were captured, televised and broadcast on various platforms. These documented materialities, if neglected, could be relegated to a digital wasteland translating to a loss of lived experience about Kenya's present condition. The assets created were a masterclass on how to care for and preserve the digital archives, as well as to ensure their accessibility to people, rebellions and revolutions in the future (Yahwon2024). A people centred socio-political discourse was mobilised and delivered *en masse* regionally and within the diaspora in a spectrum of registers including humour, grief, and rage by a body politics. What the protests communicated revealed multiple truths and intrinsic positions on ethnicity,

class and gender divides. The assets termed as collateral form part of a documentation that reveals sound ideology as effective decolonial praxis. What would it look like for us to create archives for and about ourselves, as discursive practices dealing with dominant social capitalist power, talking about Kenyans' everyday lives, and re-assembling people's memories and experiences?

Unrest became an arena, *Maandamano* a veritable production of cultural assets that revealed who we are as Kenyans, and highlighted our motivations, thoughts and aspirations. An example of these assets is the iconic contribution published on McPipita's X Space and titled: *Fix this country! Fix this country! Fix this country!* The author spoke potently of and for the movement and set boundaries against manipulation and oppression, cursed wayward leadership that had sunk our beloved nation to an all-time low, loved on our nation and expressed it unreservedly. The author also elucidated that *kuongelelea* was for relationships and this toxicity could not be framed as such; that the situation we were in, was not it! The speaker was categorical about provision of basic services and ended with a twist, a salacious salutation. The prose and delivery were fearless, immaculate and spoke for all; spoke for the oppressed and trodden Kenyan and spoke from below.

Fix this country! Fix this country! Fix this country!

Excuse me. ... If those jobs are so nice and you are hyping about them.

Why don't you send your children to do those jobs then?

Akina Wetangula.

Send your children to do those jobs if you feel they are awesome.

The ones which are in. ... in Germany.

Which jobs are those? Which jobs are those?

We want to. ... we want to do well in our country.

Contrary to the perception that all Africans want to go, sneak into other continents and stick there, and. ... and be illegal immigrants.

We are being told they don't want us!

Contrary to the opinion that Africans just want to leave their con-continent.

Kenyans want to do well in their country.

They want to thrive. They want to have decent jobs. They want to. ... they want to pay the taxes for services that they will get.

Services they will get!

Why are we paying taxes like Europe?

Yet we have. ...

Shitty healthcare, shitty education, shitty housing conditions.

We are not even getting water Pipita!

Water! A basic need.

Basic need Pipita!

And then this guy wants to gaslight us to the world, that we don't want to pay our fair share of taxes.

You guys want to shine on Tiktok showing your three four ka ka ka-nini guzzlers

You want to show the world the way you have a big mansion

Shame on that MP who had a big mansion in a place where people can barely make it in a week.

These guys are just wicked! Wicked! And they want us to talk.

Tunaongelelea nini?

We said talking stage is for relationship, it's not for you guys who know how to do better

You people are shameless! And you want to use the church and you want to use Christianity.

May the God of Abraham, Isaac and Abednego all of these characters in those bibles. ... Check out Komotoni!

All those tears that have cried, all the blood that has been shed

May it fall on you, your children, your grandchildren, four generations in.

Because you are wicked! How you have sold us to the devil, you have sold us to modern slavery,

you have sold us to neo colonialism,
 You have decided we shall never rise
 Mark this! you people are not immortal
 We will turn this country around and we will fix it!
 And we will make sure we will not have any other political class member drag us to hell, the way you
 people are dragging us to hell.
 We will make sure... if you feel like you are sacrificing too much.
 Quit your job! Go back to your chicken farming, go back to whatever it is you used to do or in your
 day job.
 That guy who has a Sportspesa—rudi back to that!
 Ok me I can, me I can... me I can talk forever, but anyway
 I'm so excited about this space. This guy really cares about us.
 Mschew!!

This patriotic enunciation was decolonial praxis par excellence, a manifesto empowering and
 priming everyone under the sound of her voice to delink from what Mignolo calls the colonial
 matrix of power. The main message of *Maandamano* is that we should be the K to BRICS in
 a determination to set us away from the Western Imperial paradigm. *Fix this country!* was an
 urgent call to action for Kenya to exist away from western knowledge, a legacy speaking truth
 to power. With the subsequent abductions, killings by snipers, and incarcerations, however, the
 shift went to acute pain, but the sorrow activated a selfless display of generous acts of giving
 through raising funds for the bereaved families, handing out bottled water to demonstrators
 and even offering them cover to avoid capture by the police.

Kenyan Asians were also present in the protests, there to show presence and show up for
 the nation. Inclusivity was the theme in focus—I *belong and yes I'm Asian*. These acts brought
 together an ensemble, an exposition of the Kenyan condition. There were allegations of
 corporate betrayal by the big green giant and for many to show up for the protests meant
 there was a continuum nostalgic remonstrance of activism as resignations from the board and
 disassociation with Safaricom by influencers was hyped.

From Nyeri came a gem of a soft launch for a future masterpiece. Parfum de Revolution
 accompanied by a hard-core gent, donning a onesie, putting in a request for a teargas flanker
 with a strawberry note profile. The packaging of the canister alone reassures one that this could/
 would/should be a solid success on the fragrance market. Positioning means acquiring the
 authentic meta narrative that has potential to be a commercial success even as an exercise
 in imagining what you can get from the archive and what you do with it. I am here in the
 moment and seeing possibilities and lastly the frag juice would present well in the baby-reveal
 pink colour that KDF hosed protesters with in Nairobi CBD (Central Business District).

Arguably *Maandamano* triggered, shifted and elevated individual and collective thinking and
 consciousness. By engaging in archival care practices of intangible and tangible materialities,
 historical legacies can become insurance for future freedoms. Furthermore, dismantling prior
 fragile essentialist notions and framing novel identities have revealed and mutated into more
 robust and valuable legacies in an ongoing battle for ongoing battle for self-determination, and
 of our dignity and humanity as Kenyans in today's world.

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Why all Generations are part of the Gen Z Revolution

Wambui JL

In June through to August of 2024, Kenya witnessed widespread pro-good governance protests, led by Generation Z, sweeping across the nation. I joined two of these peaceful demonstrations on June 18th and again on June 25th, when #OccupyParliament occurred. The response from the government of the day, was a wave of extrajudicial killings of young, peaceful citizens¹ by the Kenya Police. It is estimated that over 60 Kenyan citizens lost their lives, with many more injured, maimed, or abducted by the state.

From day one, it was clear to me that these protests were different. Having attended several demonstrations in Nairobi before, I could sense a shift. The young protesters arrived fashionably dressed in the color code of the day, carrying mobile phones and water bottles, and holding self-designed placards. Their strategic confrontations with police on Wabera Street were striking—I even saw a young man calculate the trajectory of a tear gas canister and run against its tangent, skillfully avoiding the gas - a simple application of physics. On June 20th and the morning of the 25th, the atmosphere felt almost festive, with people seated on the streets chatting, taking photos and playing music.

In the days that followed, the government conceded to the protesters' demands to #RejectFinanceBill2024 and applied superficial measures such as dismissing the entire cabinet (only to reinstate problematic individuals right back when the new cabinet was announced). As the protests gained momentum every Tuesday and Thursday (and sometimes spontaneously on Sundays), I began to question why my generation – the Early Millennials - had never managed to scale our protests in the same way. This curiosity led me down a path of discovery, revealing that each generation had played a distinct role in shaping Kenya's political and social landscape.



¹About june25kenya.org

The generational cycles

Kenya's political evolution has been driven by the distinct experiences and contributions of each generation, from the Silent Generation to Gen Z. Each cohort has left its mark, responding to the challenges and opportunities of its era.

- **Freedom Fighters:** The Silent Generation laid the foundation for Kenya's independence, fighting against British colonial rule before 1963. Their struggle and sacrifices secured the nation's sovereignty and set the stage for future generations.
- **Nation Builders:** Boomers, who lived through the fight for independence, inherited a nation on the rise in the 1970s. They experienced a society with functioning public services, affordable education, and housing, enjoying relative stability and prosperity. This generation laid the groundwork for nationhood, establishing the political, social, and economic blueprint that would guide the country's development.
- **Democracy Designers:** GenX grew up during the stable period of the 1970s but faced significant challenges post-1982 after the coup attempt. In 2002 there was political agitation for multiparty democracy and the removal of the country's longest serving premier, the late President Daniel arap Moi. In their early 20s, many GenXers involved in this political movement were in university, after attending the then compulsory National Youth Service (NYS) paramilitary training. This actually helped them organize and mobilize for the political work. This era also experienced brain drain as university lecturers and many GenXers sought asylum abroad due to political turmoil caused by President Moi's heavy-handed dictatorial response to calls for Repeal of Section 2A of the then constitution that allowed only one political party. There was growing demand to allow for multipartism and thus increased democratic space.
- **Determined Entrepreneurs:** The early 2000s, during President Mwai Kibaki's first term, marked a return to stability and economic growth. Early Millennials, coming of age in their 20s, capitalized on this period to innovate and start businesses, leading to groundbreaking developments and growth in technology such as the mobile money platform Mpesa. Despite the post-election violence of 2007/8 - a stain on Kibaki's legacy - my generation, together with those before them, pushed for and achieved a new constitution in 2010, further stabilizing the nation. The constitution turned 14 years on August 27th, 2024, with not much to show of its implementation, especially around citizen's freedoms and justice.
- **Disenfranchised Reformers:** GenZ, born into an era of increasing internet access and free education, are the most educated generation. However, they are coming of age during a time of high national debt, corruption, and economic disparity. Under President Uhuru Kenyatta (2013-2022) and President William Ruto, who took office in 2022, their disillusionment has grown, particularly after broken promises around the bottom-up approach to development and punitive taxation as entailed in the Finance Bill 2024, leading to widespread distrust and calls for reform. This generation is poised to push for significant political changes, reflecting their deep disenfranchisement and desire for genuine, accountable and prudent leadership. They are also doing it off the back of technology that is generally not well understood or utilized by older generations, therefore it feels like they are mobilising faster and more effectively.
- **Future Innovators:** Meanwhile, Gen Alpha is observing the current turmoil and may come of age in a country ripe for another phase of innovation and

growth, particularly with advancements in AI and other emerging technologies. Each generation has played a crucial role in Kenya's journey: some agitating for change (Silent, Gen X, and Gen Z), with others driving society forward through innovation and growth (Millennials and Gen Alpha). As we move forward, it's clear that everyone needs to contribute, particularly as we enter a new phase of activism led by Gen Z.

The role of older generations

During a conversation about the protests with someone in their 70s, someone asked me, "What next?"—a question echoed by many of the older generations. I reminded them of the 1990s #SabaSaba when they attended protest rallies at Kamukunji grounds, Nairobi. At that time, did they know what was next? Did they believe that Kenya's 2nd President would repeal Section 2(a)? Even when it was repealed, it took another decade to oust President Moi, paving the way for President Mwai Kibaki in 2002. Back then, their only prayer was that they wouldn't be abducted and end up at Nyayo House basement torture chambers. In a strange twist of fate, history is repeating itself as we face the same fears 34 years later.

In my view, the "what next" question isn't for Gen Z to answer—they've already done their part in exposing the country's deep-seated corruption and the flaws in governance. The Finance Bill 2024 was merely a trigger. In between protests they uncovered other problematic bills surreptitiously on the floor of Parliament, many that have been withdrawn including The Assembly and Demonstration Bill, 2024. They have also revealed the highly controversial and opaque Adani- Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) lease deal that has been equated to mortgaging the country. Another exposé has been around the siphoning of taxpayer money through dubious and stalled development projects to the tune of Kes 97.136 billion according to the tracking website [<https://citizensofkenya.hakihack.com/>]. Every day brings new evidence that the country's systems have been broken and the ensuing chaos used to benefit a few individuals and their cronies.

The responsibility now lies with the older generations. We need to acknowledge that our apathy brought us to this point. When public schools failed, we found money for private schools. When public health services crumbled, we paid hefty insurance premiums for private care, only to turn to fundraising when faced with unaffordable medical bills. Instead of demanding that public services work for all, we focused on escaping "poverty" by chasing big jobs and tenders, only to remain one bill away from slipping back into poverty.

"Funny how the much older generation only views constitutional protests as the ones that can lead to anarchy. But corruption, mismanagement of public resources, nepotism, bloated parliament, opulence, bad laws, extra judicial killings and disappearances, to them, can never harm the country. So, they are more comfortable with the ugly status quo than to ruffle feathers for positive change to come." Hussein Khalid, Human rights activist, lawyer and CEO of Vocal Africa.

Our complacency must end. It's time for us to take responsibility and decide what comes next. At this critical juncture, every generation has a role to play, and we cannot leave Gen Z to shoulder this burden alone. We must review our personal and corporate values before determining national values. As leaders in our respective fields, we need to convene in professional groupings to generate ideas and shape policy. We can't hold the government to a higher standard than we hold ourselves. We can't demand integrity from leaders while every day we compromise our own ethics for personal gain.

While there is wisdom to be drawn from past generations, the focus now is on how to demand a future that we can look forward to. We must support Gen Z by building strategic systems around policy, governance, accountability, and transparency in our areas of influence. That way, when Gen Z is ready, they can plug into a framework that propels the nation forward as it continues to evolve, bringing both new challenges and new opportunities for each generation to shape Kenya's future.

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Reinventing Activistic Spaces: Digital Perspectives

James Gitonga & Antony Mukasa Mate

Introduction

The practice of activism has been around for centuries. However, with time, the form it has taken and the issues it covers have changed. In the past, nearly all activist activities relied on in-person involvement such as sit-ins, protests, suicide or rallies (Martin 2007). Perhaps, one of the earliest recorded forms of activism was suicide. The *Igbo landing Mass suicide* of 1803 involved Igbo captives from what is now modern Nigeria, taken to the Coast of Georgia. Upon arrival, on board the *Wanderer*, the slaves rose in rebellion, took control of the ship, drowned their captors, walked into the marshy waters of Dunbar Creek, and committed mass suicide (Momodu, 2016).

Wole Soyinka has shown that literature and artistic expression can be formidable tools for challenging oppression, advocating for Justice and inspiring social change (The Conversation, 2024). Unlike the past forms of activism across the world, over generations, the approach, form and techniques of activism have been punctuated with numerous changes. For example, the recent upsurge of activism in Kenya has taken a unique trajectory, predominantly characterised by relatively young people, popularly known as Gen Z. This generation of young people, facing unemployment, constant exposure to grim realities, and a general amplified sense of crisis, took matters into their hands and stormed the capital city, while swashbuckling, gut whirling with anxiety and heart racing, bracing for impact (Mwazemba, 2024). Mwazemba further avers that, 'they poured into Nairobi streets, some holding up banners and waving them in the air like flags, the flags of an unstoppable army, there to spread a message of defiance, the anarchy of pure heedlessness and 'I dare You!'. The above viewpoint forms the gist of our study, as we endeavour to investigate the reinvention of activistic spaces through the digital world, causing a revolution in activism, change of tact and a more versatile technique of voicing dissatisfaction with the state.

Digital Perspectives In Activism

In the recent weeks, Kenya has experienced unprecedented protests spearheaded by Gen Z. However, what sets these demonstrations apart is their meticulous organization through social media channels, a tactic that has effectively mobilised thousands of passionate protesters (Ngigi, 2024). We endeavor to investigate what has made the ongoing activism a massive movement to agitate for various reforms.

(a) Poetry of protest

Our memory, thought and personality are incomplete without unrestrained expression and for all practical purposes, verse has been our succour. Our linguistic memories and the language in which we express them serve not just to narrate our tales but also empower us to give voice to our dissent or acceptance (Saranya, 2022). Gen Z have used poetry as a tool for protest effectively. The following poem was a dedication to the young people felled by the police bullets during the recent demonstrations:

Mama, I made it!
I occupied parliament
Remember the
#occupyParliament
Demonstrations?
But tell papa I'm sorry
I won't come home tonight
Not because I'm spending at a friend. No!
Not because I'm among the injured. No!
Nor because I was abducted as they have to most of us.
That would have been better
I'm in a cold dark place called the morgue mama

...

The poem is solemn and sends across commiserations for those killed in the demonstrations. The fact that the dead person is personified as a mouth piece for their own predicaments makes the poem more melancholic but still instils hope to the activists not to give up the fight, akin to Bob Marley's song *Get up, stand up for your rights*.

There was a screenshot in social media juxtaposing the image of president during a public address and a youth reciting a spoken word that expresses frustration with the current regime in Kenya. The youth is dressed in a 'prison-like' attire, perhaps to connote the 'bondage of the economy' and bad governance. The poem is in sheng language with a translation provided. Note the use of the word *Zakayo* referring to the president. The name has its root from the Bible, where Zacchaeus a tax collector was loathed for corrupt tax collection practices. It will be recalled that in the recent past, the president had proposed a number of new taxes in the 2024 Finance Bill that has since been dropped following weeks of deadly protests. The spoken word is a parody and satire for false promises from the political leaders during campaigns. Once the leaders are elected, they renege on their promises, commit excesses like demolishing houses for slum dwellers, and commit extra judicial killings through rogue security systems:

Tutaunganisha stima,
Tutaunda Barabara,
Tutajenga serikali na vijana,
Boda Boda na Mama Mboga,
Mr president ni rutooo
Ndani unatupeleka
Kusema education ni free
Na vile books ni expensive
Ni kuexercise our minds
Kusema education ni free
Na jana kuna mtoi alisare shule
Juu ya kukosa uniform
Kuexercise our minds
So unafeel aje?
Unafeel aje wakati oresu wako
Anakuongoza national anthem
'na tujenge taifaaaa!'
Halafu Mathare, korogocho,
Kwa jenga wanabomolewa.
'Mkinichaguaaaa!'
'Hakuna kijana atapigwa risasi '
'Hebu nione kwa mikono '
'Wale wanasema tuanze '
Na yule mtu wa bottom
Bottom! Up!

We will connect electricity
We will tarmac roads
We will have a government of the youth
the Boda Boda guys and vegetable sellers
Ruto is the President
You are just capturing us
Saying education is free
And yet books are expensive
its exercising our minds
Saying education is free
And yesterday a child quit school
For lack of uniform
its exercising our minds
So how do you feel?
How do you feel, when your president
leads the national anthem
'oh let us build our nation '
When Mathare, Korogocho dwellings
Are being demolished
'If you elect me!'
'No youth will be shot '
'let me see by the show of hands '
'those saying we start '
'with the person at the bottom '
Bottom! Up!

The following poetic piece was fetched from an X account. The writer seems frustrated by the death of David Chege, who was shot in the head during the protests.

*I saw his brains oozing out like porridge.
It traumatized me*

I did not believe what our country had turned into

*Today, we march for our fallen heroes.
We march for Rex and others.*

#OccupyCBDThursday

The post acted as a clarion call that Gen Z protestors should not relent in their call for good governance and stopping police brutality. Thus, we argue that through the use of X space, a digital platform, the protestors call for courage in activism, reawakening and cultural shift in the manner of carrying out activism. Moreover, this kind of activism can reach thousands of people at the press of a button. Rasha (2018) adjudges that 'many of the important writers over the ages have utilized their expertise to awakening the societies to injustices 'locally and universally. Further, they have in its spectrum, some of the most instigating thoughts to provoke the emotions, besides such writings on the struggle of the individuals against social injustice. Protest art is the art that concentrates on disavowing the society's drawbacks and art that either supports or opposes some types of political or social amendments'(p.1).

(b) Pictorial Protest art

Much art is committed to political causes (Simoniti,2021). Simoniti further queries, 'does art contribute something unique to political discourse, or does it merely reflect the insights of political science and political philosophy?'(p.1). The ongoing protests in Kenya have been popularised with posters bearing different writings,images and pictures. Johnson & Munene (2022) argue that 'street art, urban art or graffiti has become a voice for social change. It has greatly been used to push boundaries and make statements in the country...a powerful tool that has brought rise to resistance movements and publicized protests'(p.167).

(i) Gen Z Protests: A revolution aided by technology

The image depicts a police lorry surrounded by protestors while taking pictures or filming with their mobile phones. The police officers can be seen smiling at the scene of a big crowd with their phones up yet its during protests:



Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that the reinvention of activist spaces has reinvigorated the nature of protests in the 21st century the digital platform has been found to be a key enabler, appropriate for the Gen Z and coincides with the spirit of the time. Through poetry of protest like spoken word, use of images and representation, there has been intensification of keeping the government of the day in checks and balances, while condemning atrocities and blatant abuse of power.

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“The People Shall. Mandatory.”

Happiness Mena

We are in the middle of a protest song chanting *'bado mapambano, mapambano mapambano'*, fists raised and marching in place outside Nation Centre. It's the first protest. My new friend who I met via a call for a protest buddy on a writing WhatsApp group and I don't know it yet, but we will both get injured in the next minute or so. But before we get injured, before she falls and splits her chin on the pavement and I - running thinking she is behind me - turn not to see her and twist my ankles in fright, we are chanting and marching buoyed by the strong voices around us.

The People shall protest.

The first protest poster communicated an important vision. We were to meet in town, march to parliament and sit outside parliament as a physical representation of our loud NOs against the Finance Bill that up till then had been ignored. *Delulu being the solulu*, I packed my knitting because as the saying popular to knitters and knitters alone goes “if I'm sitting, I'm knitting”. The imagery of Kenyans peacefully occupying parliament, exercising their constitutional right to protest was seductive. Even though I knew better, I wanted to hope for better.

The People shall hope.

Driven by the beautiful and evocative images and tweets about the first day of protests, the voices of the women held at central police station singing freedom songs, the videos of tired and worn out police shocked that Kenyans would dare protest all day, and not say for two hours then go home after being dispersed, Kenyans across the country arose and showed up on the streets of their cities and towns in the hundreds of thousands. I say hundreds of thousands without hesitation even without an official count because my spirit knows. My spirit knows.

The People shall revolt.

The circadian rhythm of vuvuzelas and whistles are the peaceful protestors' war cries. The warfare on the streets of cities and towns meted out by the police against citizens using weaponry kindly donated by their imperial masters. The hooded and masked thugs/police/demons in cars with blocked-out number plates, abducting us. The burn of tear gas on eyes and skin. The water cannons spraying all the water that would have saved lives and businesses if our firefighting departments had that kind of access. The taste of fear as the ricochet of gun shots and screams. The purposely designed loud boom of the tear gas canisters erupting from the tear gas grenade guns. The voice of a people exhausted, in rage, in hope rising above these instruments of violence, rising still higher and reaching our imprisoned President at State House

The People shall grieve.

We reconvene, every space once used to discuss everything else from life's mundanity to life's profundity now hosting sleepless Kenyans unable to look away, unwilling to look away as we count our people coming home and come back short. We didn't all make it home and even when we did, they followed us home, killing more of us to appease the Butcher of Sogoi. They've killed our comrades on the pavements of dirty streets, they've brutalised our comrades in the darkness of police cells. They've banned public grieving on the streets, arresting people for holding vigils, buying roses, selling roses, carrying roses, holding roses, roses being, of course, grenades. Yet the people gather and grieve on WhatsApp and X spaces, in the clubs when the clock chimes midnight and our collective prayer rises above the whisky and pain - “Ruto Must Go, Mwizi!”



The People shall create.

On TikTok, sketches about the protests/finance bill/violence/MPigs dropped within the first day of the protest. Kenyans transmuted their rage at the thieving politicians to art, exquisite in its incisive critic of the moment. Videos and photos, then sketches of protestors proliferate our timelines, we see ourselves our families our loved ones, our comrades who didn't know but love with the love of comrades unified in vision. During the protests we birth new language, we wear our protest in our dress, women walking down the streets in white diras streaked with red paint, football jersey's emblazoned Ruto Must Go, placards pronouncing "that Kaunda Suit will be your prison".

The People shall dream.

Because dreaming, as Toni Morrison declared, 'is not irresponsible; it is first-order human business.' Our collective dream of a political class held accountable drove the first part of the protest, shaped the '*leta number tumsalimie*' protest song. Our dream of a Kenya where taxes aren't a man's get rich quick scheme, political office isn't a tool towards consolidation of power and health care and education isn't the preserve of the rich took us to the streets in June, July and August. Our dream of what Kenya could be dominates our conversation, our downtime, bedtime, worktime. We are a people dreaming again. The dream of a Kenya without Ruto and everything he represents is first order Kenyan business. Dream loudly, dream wildly, dream with true liberation for all of us, dream a world without the IMF, a world without World Bank, a life in which we all get to live and die in Kenya with dignity, especially with dignity. Dream urgently of a green country where our land is not sold at throw away prices to investors/colonizers and our seeds are not illegal. Dream of solidarity with other people in other countries (Palestine/Congo/Haiti/Sudan) and how a unified liberation creates the world we want to live in.

Happiness Mena is a creative writer.



The Revolution Will Be Live Tweeted: Social Media as the Catalyst for the Kenyan Resistance

Vanessa Cyrilla

The revolution comes bearing hashtags, live videos and GitHub profile links. The call to freedom is as pressing as it is new, urging the masses to adapt to the version of change that Generation Z subscribes to. They are intrepid, energetic and outright fearless in the pursuit of a free and fair country. In a fully democratic and corruption-free Kenya, generations to come will have no choice but to acknowledge the internet tactics that led their people to freedom.

On June 18th 2024, the democratic republic of Kenya experienced what would be described as the most united nationwide physical protest in its history. The protests saw an exhaustive resource of young people taking to the streets to air out grievances brought about by the possibility of passing of the unpopular 2024 Finance Bill. What was seen while on ground was nothing short of vibrance and virality from one of Kenya's youngest and most patriotic groups. From chants to dancing to pep talks to marches – a majority of the populace was gathered under one cause through all means peaceful and necessary to better the state of their nation. There was nothing short of community in the voices of hundreds of thousands. This mighty result could be accredited to a plethora of planning, the main prong of which being the vast utilization of social media.

The famed dancing app TikTok became a national treasure to many Kenyans who needed information. Content creators were on TikTok Live, a livestreaming platform, as early as 8am showing routes to take as well as safe points and refuges. Later in the day, TikTok dances were formed along to the revolution's theme song, *Anguka Nayo* by local artist The Hood Music featuring Wadagliz. It was truly a marvel to witness to see thousands of hands held up recording, resharing, and revelling in a major section of history.

The content filming came to be of great importance for creatives such as the independent filmmaker Brian Oبرا who was on ground collecting footage of police interactions. Violence, cruelty, and brutality from the police force was seen paralleling the indomitable human spirit, kindness and good faith coming from the people through the lens of skilled videographers. Filmmaking was embraced by artists such as Kigen? who produced gripping short films on what it means to be Kenyan and fighting. Moreover, the Kenyan music industry's very own artists banded together to boost morale and inject a fighting spirit into its people.

The internet saw singles from hip hop artist Sabi Wu, among others, as well as covers of the motivating 2019 banger, *Tujiangalie* by Sauti Sol, by international pop star Bien Aime Baraza. Outside of showing up and documenting, creators banded together to use their platform to carry out civic education. Articles surrounding parliamentary bills were presented in a manner that was digestible to the attention spans of the youth as backgrounds in story times, *Get Ready With Me* (GRWM) videos and slideshows that implemented colourful graphics. Not one person was to be left out as one comedic content creator, Mike Muchiri, stood out for creating a platform where key concerns brought up by the proposed 2024 Finance Bill were translated into local languages. A generation not bound by language or tribe and working together to educate its people. What we saw were multiple volunteers,

country wide, offering their translations to be shared online for the older generation. It was not just the willingness that stood to impress with this course of action but the swiftness as well – the protests gave a chance to Gen Z to prove their love for their country and their people. Diversity and consideration were seen in the videos of sign language translators taking their space to communicate with the deaf community. The timeline was running over with Kisii, Rendille, Taita and Turkana highlighting the affairs of the nation.

Mobilization online was no small feat. Opportunities to air frustrations and have passionate conversation were provided on X (formerly known as Twitter) spaces. There were X personalities using their following as a medium to reach as many users as they could. It slowly but certainly became a nightly event to look forward to hearing voices like your own share thoughts on accountability, fiscal planning and revolution. In these free rein environments, jokes and tears mixed in varying measures when recounting each other's experiences. In these spaces, however, a few bad apples were determined to frustrate the movement by spreading misinformation, inciting violence and causing divisions. The greater good prevailed as those caught with the intent of doing harm to the movement were denied their platform by a mass unfollowing and therefore lacked the agency to spread their seeds of discord.

Online activism proved its worth through tags such as *#RejectFinanceBill2024*, *#OccupyParliament* and *#TotalShutdownKenya* were imperative in the movement. Kenyans sought to get attention from the international community and succeeded in doing so. Keyboard warriors put aside their squabbles to push forth the worthy agenda that was raising awareness. As many as four million tweets built up to the nation trending across multiple platforms. This caused a ripple, initially, that would later become the wave of international awareness as seen by US based TikTok creator Xevi Gold making an educative video on the actions that led to the rage filled protests. Kenyans in the diaspora made their mark as well by ensuring their respective embassies were paying attention. Kenyans in DC, Washington, armed with flags and banners, marched to the Kenyan Embassy to raise alarm on the threat to condone the passing of the 2024 Finance Bill.

It was all hands-on deck in the tech development space. Programmers, full stack developers, analysts and software engineers across the country were hard at work. The USSD, *665*971#, titled Hold Hands March Together, created an avenue to find out meetup points, report medical emergencies, arrests and brutality, and even find out how your MP voted regarding the bill. In addition to posting to find missing persons, notable software was developed by our very own Joy Mutheu and her team. This was a missing persons database where one could report loved ones who did not return home after protesting. Their work was consolidated for public use via a website that could be easily accessed by anyone with a device and some internet connection. What's more, a Finance Bill GPT was introduced as an Artificial Intelligence tool to simplify contents of the Finance Bill.

Ultimately, the maandamano held in the middle of June 2024 in Kenya serves as a testament to the power of social media platforms, technology, art, and togetherness in driving forth meaningful change in or society. Undoubtedly, this new digital age harnessed by our very own Generation Z has provided a new battleground for justice.

Vanessa Cyrilla is a writer, focusing on reshaping African experiences through her personal lens. Her work often weaves together nostalgia and love, while also addressing the complexities of contemporary life in Kenya. Through her blog and published work, she creates space for readers to explore both personal and societal themes rooted in the African experience.



It was all hands-on deck in the tech development space. Programmers, full stack developers, analysts and software engineers across the country were hard at work.



‘Colonial Police’: The faceless soundtrack of Kenya's 2024 protests

Asajile Mwakalinga

Introduction

Towards the end of Kenya's 2023/2024 financial year, the government proposed the Finance Bill 2024, which included significant tax hikes on essential goods and services, exacerbating an already high cost of living. Many Kenyans, especially those from lower-income groups, viewed the bill as unfair and burdensome amidst ongoing economic hardships. This widespread discontent led to a series of peaceful demonstrations against the proposed Finance Bill, spearheaded primarily by the Gen Z movement.

Despite the public outcry, the government initially pressed forward with the bill, leading to heightened tensions and violent clashes between demonstrators and security forces. The policing of these protests reflected a continuation of the heavy-handed approach that has historically characterized law enforcement's response to public assemblies in Kenya. As Dr Mutuma Ruteere and Patrick Mutahi note, policing in Kenya has often been criticised for its excessive use of force and failure to protect citizens' rights during protests (Ruteere & Mutahi, 2023). These confrontations resulted in tragic loss of lives, further fuelling public anger and galvanising the protestors.

However, the relentless protests, driven by the Gen Z movement, eventually forced the president to reconsider and ultimately decide not to sign the bill into law. This decision was a significant victory for the demonstrators, yet their demands did not stop there. The movement, now more energised and cohesive, shifted its focus to demand for accountability for the deaths that occurred during the protests, as well as for the persistent issues of public fund mismanagement and corruption.

Unlike previous protests in Kenya, this movement was different. It was largely peaceful, driven by a robust online activism campaign, particularly the hashtag *#RejectFinanceBill2024*. The participants were predominantly from Generation Z, and the movement was unique in being organic, leaderless, and free from ethnic or political affiliations. This was a stark contrast to past demonstrations in Kenya, which were often marred by violence and political manipulation. As highlighted by Dr. Duncan Onyango and Dr Petronila Otuya, police preparedness and attitude towards managing public assemblies have often been poor, contributing to the escalation of violence during such events (Onyango & Otuya, 2023).

Previous demonstrations in Kenya have shown a similar pattern of governmental resistance followed by violent repression. For example, the 2007/2008 post-election violence and the 2017 protests following the contested presidential election both witnessed severe police crackdowns, which human rights organizations widely condemned. In both instances, the judiciary played a critical role in protecting the right to assembly, although political interference often limited its effectiveness (Ogeto & Wanyoike, 2023).

The 2024 protests marked a turning point in Kenya's protest culture. The involvement of a younger, more digitally savvy generation, combined with the increasing use of social media to

organize and mobilize, created a movement that was harder to suppress and more difficult to control through traditional policing methods. The peaceful nature of the protests, despite the provocations, and the broad public support they garnered, indicated a significant shift in how Kenyans are choosing to voice their discontent.

Music in the demonstrations

As in previous protests, music played a crucial role in rallying the demonstrators. Songs like *"Utawala"* by Juliani, *"Tujiangalie"* by Sauti Sol, and *"Daima Mkenya"* by Eric Wainaina, among others, were commonly heard at these demonstrations. It's also common practice for protestors to adapt the lyrics of older songs to fit the current movement. For example, a religious song with the lyrics *"Yote yawezekana kwa imani,"* [Everything is possible by faith] was chanted with the words *"Yote yawezekana bila Ruto,"* meaning [Everything is possible without Ruto.]. This song was used in the Moi must go protests around the 2002 elections. The former song *"wanapanga kutumaliza"* meaning "They are planning to finish us" by Pastor Ng'ang'a was also sampled by King Kaka and used widely in the protest, alluding to the murder of protestors by the police.

At this point, demonstrators embraced any song with lyrics that could be connected to the protests, whether literally or metaphorically. A notable example is *"Anguka Nayo"* [fall with it] by the group Wadagliz Ke, which became synonymous with the president's decision to dismiss the Cabinet under pressure from the protests.

Alongside the classic protest songs, artists released new tracks for the demonstrations. Notable among them are *"Maandamano"* by Bien and Breeder LW, and *"Gen Z"* by Wakadinali and Khaligraph Jones. These new releases quickly became anthems of the movement, further energizing the protestors and adding to the powerful musical backdrop of the demonstrations.

Whose voice is this?

'Colonial Police', an AI generated music video that has garnered over four hundred thousand views since its launch in June at the heart of protests, stands out as a powerful and resonant piece of art that skilfully blends catchy beats, melodic rhythms, emotional lyrics, and compelling visuals. This song emerged as a significant cultural artefact, rapidly circulating on social media amidst the height of the Gen Z demonstrations. Its widespread appeal and captivating nature sparked a considerable amount of curiosity, leading many, including myself, to delve deeper into its origins and the creative process behind it.

Upon further investigation, I discovered the full version of the song on YouTube, which left me pondering about the voice and vision behind this remarkable piece of music. The answer to this question is as intriguing as the song itself. According to the owner of the YouTube channel that posted the piece, Mr Guy Kenya, the creation of "Colonial Police" was a collaborative effort involving the use of both traditional music production techniques and artificial intelligence (AI). The channel owner, who is proficient in various aspects of production; graphics design, video editing, and music production chose to incorporate AI into the process.

The choice to use AI raises important questions about the evolving nature of music production and the role of technology in artistic expression. When asked why AI was chosen, the producer's response was both practical and philosophical: "I used AI because it is quick, and you get to choose the vocals and style. It's about versatility." This statement reflects a broader trend in the creative industries, where AI is increasingly being used to enhance the efficiency and flexibility of the production process, allowing artists to experiment with different styles and sounds that might be difficult or time-consuming to achieve through traditional means.

However, the use of AI in "Colonial Police" also touches on deeper issues of anonymity and safety in the context of political activism. Unlike other protest songs that emerged during these demonstrations, "Colonial Police" lacks a recognised voice or a face to which it can be attributed.

¹https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Colonial+Police

This anonymity was not a mere artistic choice but a necessary precaution in a socio-political environment where the fear of abductions, arrests, and even death loomed large for those who dared to speak out against the government.

The initial decision to remain anonymous, underscores the precarious nature of dissent in repressive contexts. The producer candidly shared, “At first, I wanted to stay anonymous, but hey, the fear is gone. We have to stand for what’s right no matter the cost. So yes, I’d like to get recognised. After all, I created it.” This shift from anonymity to a desire for recognition reflects a critical moment in the life of the artist—one where the imperative to bear witness and take a stand against injustice outweighs the instinct for self-preservation. He elaborated on this realization, stating, “The realisation that they prey on our fear and that fearless, we are a million times more formidable. Besides, why fear when doing right?” This powerful statement encapsulates the transition from fear to fearlessness, emphasising the strength that comes from standing up for justice, even in the face of potential danger.

The tension between the desire for safety and the drive for public acknowledgement is a recurring theme in the history of protest art, where the stakes are often life and death.

Moreover, the use of AI in this context raises important ethical and philosophical questions. By selecting and manipulating vocals and styles through AI, the producer not only challenges traditional notions of authorship and originality but also complicates the relationship between the artist and the audience. In a sense, AI serves as both a tool for artistic expression and a mask that obscures the identity of the creator, further blurring the lines between human and machine, creator and creation.

“Colonial Police” is more than just a song; it is a symbol of resistance, a testament to the power of art in the face of oppression, and a reflection of the complex interplay between technology, anonymity, and activism. As AI continues to play an increasingly prominent role in the arts, it will be important for scholars and practitioners alike to critically examine the implications of these developments, particularly in contexts where the stakes are as high as they are in Kenya’s ongoing struggle for justice and accountability.

Conclusion and future implications

The 2024 Gen Z protests in Kenya against the Finance Bill, underscore a significant transformation in the nature of public dissent. Their adept use of digital platforms and innovative approaches such as integration of AI into protest music, has set a new precedent in how movements are organized and executed. *“Colonial Police,”* as a symbol of this movement, highlights the intersection of art, technology, and activism in the modern era.

As we look forward, the use of AI in creating protest art raises important questions about the future of artistic expression and political resistance. Will AI continue to be a tool for those who seek to remain anonymous in their activism, or will it become a means of further surveillance and control by repressive regimes? How will the shift towards digital and leaderless movements affect the long-term sustainability of such protests, and what role will traditional forms of activism play in this evolving landscape?

The future of protest in Kenya and globally will likely see a continued blending of technology, art, and activism. This evolving landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for those who seek to hold power accountable. As we continue to witness these developments, it will be crucial for scholars, activists, and policymakers to critically engage with these trends, ensuring that the tools and strategies of protest are used to empower, rather than oppress the voices of the people.

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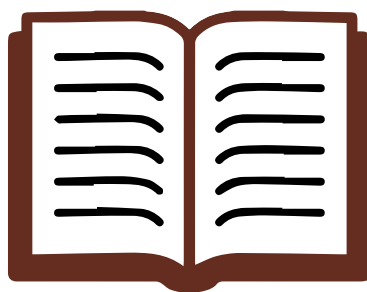
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Book Review

G Oluoch-Olunya

Author: Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi

Title: *Architecture of Migration: The Dadaab Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Settlement.*

Publisher: Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2024.

Series: Theory In Forms

Pages: 412

Reviewer: G Oluoch-Olunya

Origins. Partitions. Borders. And Migrations. It is through these four snapshots, offering multiple and interlinked perspectives, that Architect AbdulFatah Adam imagines Dadaab. His dual Somali/Kenyan sensibility sharpens the view from Somalia, his invited countermapping sitting in counterpoint to, and lending added clarity to Anooradha Siddiqi's initial focus on Dadaab as a fixed humanitarian construct, as an immobilized and sedentary settlement. What was envisioned as a temporary encampment, a humanitarian emergency response, has seen more than three generations born in what Siddiqi refers to as 'emergency subjecthood'.

Once the largest hosting camp by the UNHCR, this refugee Complex – it has been given purpose by designers and builders – was segregated from the rest of Kenya. A beleaguered history of tensions along the North-Eastern border (the 1963-1968 Northern Frontier District–NFD–Shifta war that seeped into subsequent decades) prompted containment policies, restricting movement, and complicating Somali transition to Kenya. Associations with banditry sat uneasily with the UN's insistence on humanitarian accommodation. This historical complexity was exacerbated by attacks in Westgate in 2013, at Garissa University in 2015, and at Dusit in 2019. Planned and executed from Dadaab by the militant Al Shabaab, a terrorist group, any planned transitioning into integrated settlements has met with understandable hostility on the ground. International pressure (drawing on the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees and subsequent protocols, and closer to home the 1969 OAU Convention on Refugees, this last ratified by Kenya) saw the enactment of the Refugees Act (2021), an Act of Parliament to provide for the recognition, protection and management of refugees, and with a new framework for local integration that saw the Kenya Government announce the phasing of camps to municipalities.¹ Following through, the World Bank has recently offered Kenya Sh46 billion 'for second phase urban centres improvement plan', in which a 'USD 50 million grant will support implementation of the Refugee(s) Act and help integrate these communities with their host communities, through establishment of two special municipalities at Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps. The World Bank will also provide USD 1 million for technical support.'²

This is a significant shift in policy towards a community whose 'permanent impermanence', whose 'existential *and* representational ephemerality' continues despite international negotiation. And yet legitimate Kenya Somali, separated from greater Somalia by colonial border are, after all, bound by clan. The Kenya Government threat to close the camps in 2017, for instance, saw renewed commitment by the international community to keep the camps open, in situ. But what does this new promise to secure refugee futures mean? Siddiqi argues that the colonial condition is immanent in the humanitarian. The book examines the transience of this fractured migrant, and the anchoring of architectures that shift the precarity

¹ Mary Wambui, *NMG Online*, May 10, 2023.

² Dudley Muchiri, *Daily Nation*, May 8, 2024, p. 40.

of refugee into a permanent state. Even as this space is located outwith the State, it also mimics the State, organising internally, for instance through elections and governance frameworks. Siddiqi could only speculate in her research, ending on the note of partitions; of the precarity of 'how we may live together, owing each other debts, and together building common heritages, knowledges, and futures' (320), even as she willed an attendant 'restitution and repair' (316). The enfoldment into municipality and the 'normalisation', even inclusivity, that the World Bank proposition suggests may serve to anchor those for whom belonging has been elusive. Whilst in the 1980's most refugees fleeing instability anticipated relocation to the West, it is the explosion in numbers, and this spectre of permanence that has perhaps driven Britain, most controversially, to outsource its refugees to Rwanda.

Siddiqi notes this exponential growth of the population in the camps. Some 'grew tenfold to more than 148, 000 people between 1989 and 2010, well in excess of the rate in the North- Eastern Province'. Other camps planned to accommodate 90,000 were by 2011 hosting 460, 000 (9). She remarks, 'The astonishing population of the Dadaab camps, the third largest grouping in Kenya after Nairobi and Mombasa', going further to problematise the confinement and marginalisation that may have occasioned this implosion (14). To complicate matters, shared identity markers and kinship affiliation ease the intermingling of the refugee population with the local; 'speaking Somali, Boran(a), Kiswahili, and English; practicing Islam; sharing familial lineage, and adhering to communal economic approaches'(15). There are advantages to be gained by this fluidity, which include the all-important ration card, as well as receiving other goods and services offered by aid agencies.

It is this imbrication, these tightly woven overlaps that override what may appear as a 'visual frailty—dwellings covered in recovered textiles and sheet metal fragment, dusted red by the earth and wind'. These are the tents, the 'tuquuls' visualised by local artist Deqa Abshir on the book cover, and which once symbolised traditional life, here modified. They sit in sharp contrast to the 'equally dazzling substance—an array of satellites and their dishes, aeronautic fleets resting on tarmac, all-terrain vehicular convoys, aluminium and polyvinyl chloride water storage towers, hydraulic extraction machinery, and the large settlements themselves—anchors hard infrastructures in the earth and sky' (17). Ultimately, thinking with Dadaab's socio-spatial and historical contexts as she theorises Dadaab as humanitarian settlement, Siddiqi takes us from these architectural experiences to a riveting intellectual history, but always bearing in mind that Dadaab is 'driven not only by abstract forces of relief and development;' it is about being, in the philosophical sense, in the camp—it is about actual people.

This book is the culmination of 12 years of academic and environmental research in East Africa and comparative spaces, interviews with hundreds of residents, many conversations, and encounters. It carries these years lightly, successfully conveying the richness and depth of a sustained engagement, evolving a cogent theoretical lens. That the book signals, in the 'Afterword', spill-over to an interactive exhibition opens up urgent avenues of multi- and interdisciplinary exploration and shift. Collaborators include local Cave Bureau, engaged in conceptual work with an aquifer to harness past practice for future use. Without the Merti aquifer, without water, there would be no camp. It is significant as part of 'enabling infrastructures' that maintain Dadaab. The GoDown Arts Centre is curatorial and archival partner for such aspects of the work going forward. These partnerships speak to Siddiqi's collegiality, and care. Her practice and process, evident in the book, is incisive yet sensitive, empathetic to and respectful of the dignity of her subject, and contexts. She offers a beautifully realised book, not only visually, but in its meticulous detail and depth of its concerns. It does not attempt to answer all questions, maintaining an undercurrent of slippages and loose ends that are the hallmark of life itself. Siddiqi succeeds, ultimately, in establishing an important reference point for future thinking around architectural histories, refugee studies, migration, and more, issues as urgent when she started her research as they are today.

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