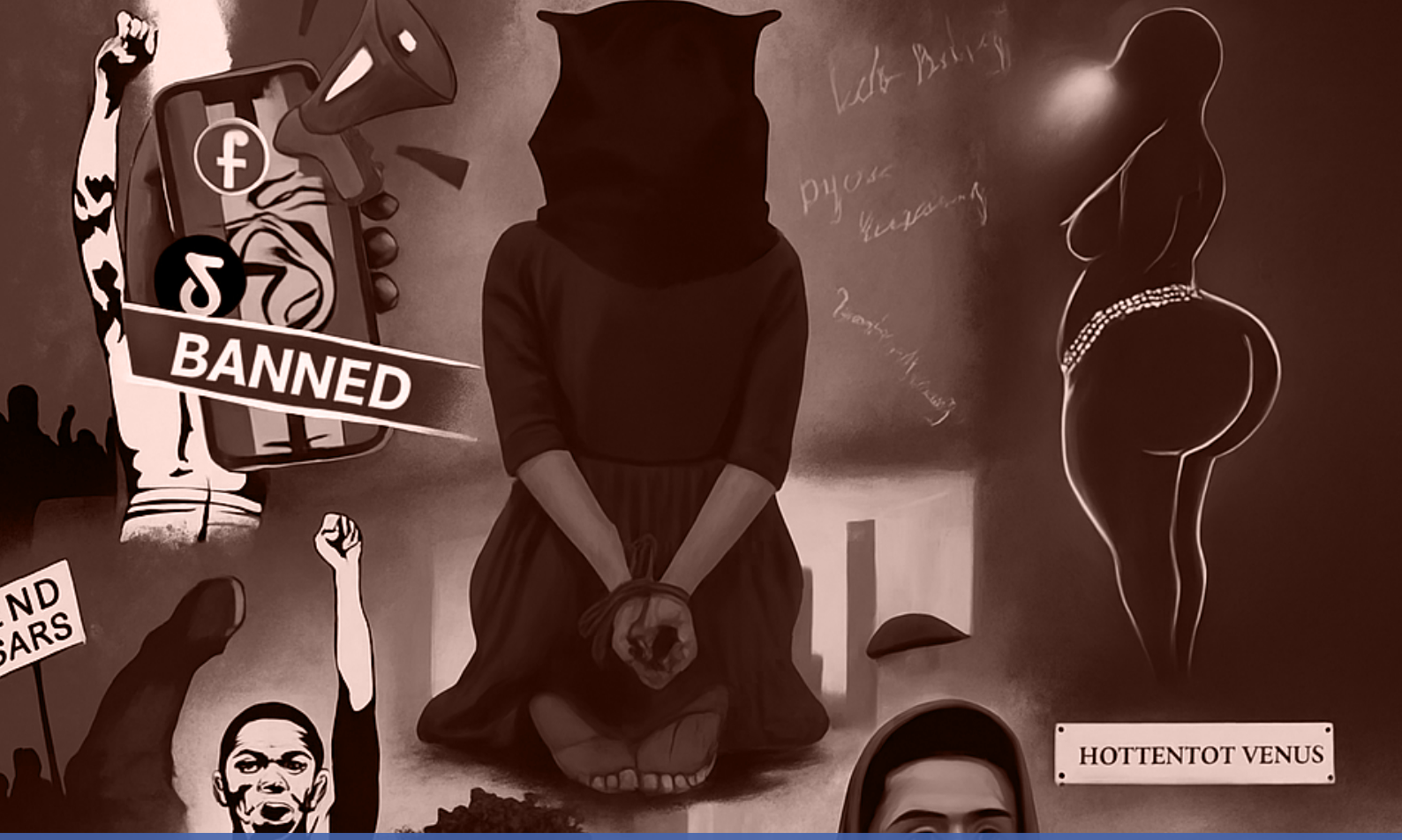


PANAF VOICES

EDITION ONE

NOVEMBER 2025

PANAF
Pan African Network for Artistic Freedom
Artistic Rights First

Contents

From the Editor's Desk

Artistic freedom – the right to create, express, and distribute art without censorship or repression – is a fundamental aspect of democracy and human rights. Around the continent, different countries' constitutions have varying guarantees of freedom of expression. Even then, artists and creatives, in general, often face challenges ranging from state censorship to societal restrictions.

This series of articles examines the current state of artistic freedom in sub-Saharan Africa, the key challenges, the legal frameworks, and the opportunities for improvement.

Since 2011, restless youths have harnessed the power of artistry to challenge civic discourses. The African continent has witnessed a surge of youth-led protest movements that have garnered global attention and catalysed significant economic, social and political transformation. From the Arab Spring uprisings in North Africa, to the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, the #ENDSARS protests in Nigeria, and the GenZ protests in Kenya, young Africans have emerged as formidable agents of social and political change using their artistic voice, energy and digital proficiency.

Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal, Sudan, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo have also experienced waves of youth protests, as have Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Sudan, Algeria and Mali.

In this edition we seek to explore the legal, social, cultural, and personal frameworks that shape how, where and when an artist feels freest to create and produce. We explore the themes that shape what an artist produces and how the audiences interact with his/her works of art. There is also societal and religious opposition; conservative religious groups protest artworks they consider "blasphemous" or "immoral". Artists have faced backlash for criticising corruption.

Facing economic constraints and exploitation, many artists struggle financially, which limits their ability to produce bold, independent work, while piracy and poor copyright enforcement reduce earnings, forcing artists into self-censorship for commercial survival.

PANAF 1.0 turns our gaze to the complex artistic landscapes where the evolving digital surveillance and online harassment are major constraints as bloggers, musicians, and digital artists face threats for creating politically sensitive content, and the laws used to target activists and artists. The overall goal is to provide a wholesome view of Africa's creative economy and the artistic terrain by highlighting the scope of the rights and freedoms of everyone who creates or consumes art.

Artistic freedom in sub-Saharan Africa is a complex issue shaped by political, social, and economic factors. While some countries embrace vibrant creative expression, artists in many countries around the continent often face censorship, repression, or limited funding. Governments sometimes restrict art that critiques authority or addresses sensitive topics like corruption or human rights. Yet, musicians, writers, and visual artists continue to push boundaries, using their work to inspire change. Social media and digital platforms have expanded opportunities for uncensored expression.

Despite the challenges, sub-Saharan Africa's art scene thrives, blending tradition with modernity, proving that creativity persists even under constraint. Artistic freedom remains both a struggle and a triumph.

In this edition, Kalundi Serumaga reminds us of the arduous path of artistic freedom in Uganda even as Joel Mukisa broadens the scope to cover the wider *Jumuiya* and the stifling of artistic freedoms. Reem Aljeally reminds us of the persistent desire to keep the spaces of artistic expression open, and Soreti Kadir explores how artistry has interacted with the different postures of post-independence regimes in Ethiopia. Tope Olatidoye provides vivid clarity on the interplay between the law and the arts in Nigeria, while Chief Nyamweya tells us where art meets AI, even as Philani Nyoni walks us down memory lane, along the contours of artistic freedoms in Zimbabwe.

Across the continent from South Africa to Nigeria, Kenya to Zimbabwe, the diverse voices paint the emerging picture of the artist's desire to capture the nuances of their society amidst the polycrisis of state repression, class dynamics, and the impact of new technological inventions. In the end, art – just like water – finds its own level.

Glossary

Key Concepts Shaping Artistic Freedom in Africa

A

Advocacy: Strategic actions to influence public policy, institutions, or social norms to promote and protect artistic freedom.

Artistic Freedom: The right to imagine, create, and share cultural expressions freely — without censorship, coercion, or intimidation.

Artivism: A blend of art and activism — using creative expression to challenge injustice and inspire social or political change.

Audience Development: The deliberate process of engaging and expanding audiences to increase participation in arts and culture.

B

Baseline Study: A reference survey used to measure the initial state of artistic freedom or cultural participation before interventions.

Bilateral Cooperation: Partnerships between two countries or cultural institutions to support exchange and co-creation in the arts.

C

Censorship: The suppression or restriction of artistic works due to political, moral, or religious reasons.

Civic Space: The enabling environment where artists, activists, and citizens can organize, participate, and express freely.

Cultural Diversity: The many ways in which the cultures of groups and societies find expression — celebrated under the UNESCO 2005 Convention.

Cultural Policy: A government or institutional framework that shapes how the arts are supported, funded, and regulated.

Creative Economy: An economy driven by creativity, knowledge, and intellectual property — covering music, film, design, and other creative industries.

D

Digital Rights: The rights that ensure individuals and artists can access, create, and share content safely and freely online.

Disinformation: False or misleading content shared intentionally to manipulate public opinion or discredit creative actors.

E

Economic Injustice: The structural inequalities that limit artists' access to fair pay, markets, and resources.

Expression, Freedom of: A cornerstone human right enabling individuals — including artists — to communicate ideas through any form or medium.

F

Freedom of Association: The right to join or form groups, collectives, or unions freely, including artistic or cultural associations.

Freedom of Assembly: The right to gather peacefully for artistic, cultural, or political purposes.

G

Gender Equality in the Arts: Ensuring fair access, representation, and opportunities for all genders in the creative sector.

Governance in Culture: The systems and processes guiding decision-making, accountability, and policy in cultural institutions.

H

Harassment of Artists: Acts of intimidation, surveillance, or violence targeting artists for their creative work or social critique.

Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA): An approach that grounds cultural policies and programs in universal human rights standards, ensuring participation and accountability.

I

Intersectionality: Recognizing how multiple forms of discrimination (e.g., gender, race, class) intersect in shaping artists' experiences.

Intellectual Property Rights (IPR): Legal protections that grant creators control and economic benefits from their original works.

J

Judicial Activism: The proactive use of courts and legal systems to challenge censorship or violations of artistic rights.

L

Labor Rights of Artists: The right of artists to fair pay, safe conditions, social protection, and recognition as workers.

Licensing and Permits: Administrative approvals required for public exhibitions, performances, or creative gatherings.

M

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E): Systematic tracking of activities and outcomes to assess the impact of artistic freedom programs.

Multistakeholder Approach: Collaboration among governments, civil society, private sector, and artists to strengthen the cultural ecosystem.

N

National Symposiums: Stakeholder forums for dialogue on national artistic freedom, cultural policy, and creative economy.

Networks and Alliances: Formal or informal coalitions, such as PANAF, that unite actors advocating for artistic freedom.

O

Online Censorship: The restriction, blocking, or algorithmic removal of digital artistic content.

Open Civic Dialogue: Free and inclusive participation of artists and cultural actors in shaping public debate and policy.

P

Policy Coherence: Ensuring that economic, cultural, and social policies align to support artistic freedom and sustainability.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): Collaborations between governments and private entities to finance or promote the arts.

R

Resilience of Artists: Artists' capacity to adapt, innovate, and sustain creativity amid social, political, or economic pressures.

Resource Mobilization: Efforts to attract funding, skills, and partnerships to support arts initiatives.

S

Safe Spaces for Artists: Physical or virtual environments that foster free expression and collaboration without fear.

Social Protection for Artists: Policies ensuring access to healthcare, pensions, and income security for artists.

Sustainability in the Arts: Strategies that ensure long-term viability of cultural initiatives and creative industries.

T

Transnational Solidarity: Cross-border collaboration among artists, institutions, and movements defending artistic freedom.

U

UNESCO 2005 Convention: An international treaty promoting the protection and promotion of cultural diversity and artistic expression.

V

Violations of Artistic Freedom: Any act that restricts or punishes artistic creation or dissemination — from censorship to imprisonment.

W

Whistleblower Protection: Legal safeguards for individuals exposing violations of artistic or cultural rights.

Working Conditions in the Arts: The environment in which artists create and perform encompassing pay, contracts, and workplace safety.

Foreword

On behalf of the Pan African Network for Artistic Freedom (PANAF), I am pleased to introduce the inaugural edition of PANAF VOICES, our digital magazine dedicated to advancing the cause of artistic freedom across the African continent. This publication marks an important milestone in our collective journey to document, reflect upon, and amplify the voices of artists and cultural practitioners who continue to shape Africa's democratic, social, and cultural landscapes.

The right to artistic expression is an integral component of human rights and a cornerstone of democratic societies. Yet, across the continent, this right is frequently challenged by censorship, restrictive legislation, economic marginalization, societal pressures, and new forms of digital surveillance. Despite these barriers, Africa's artists and creatives have consistently demonstrated resilience, courage, and innovation; ensuring that art remains a powerful tool for social transformation, civic engagement, and cultural continuity.

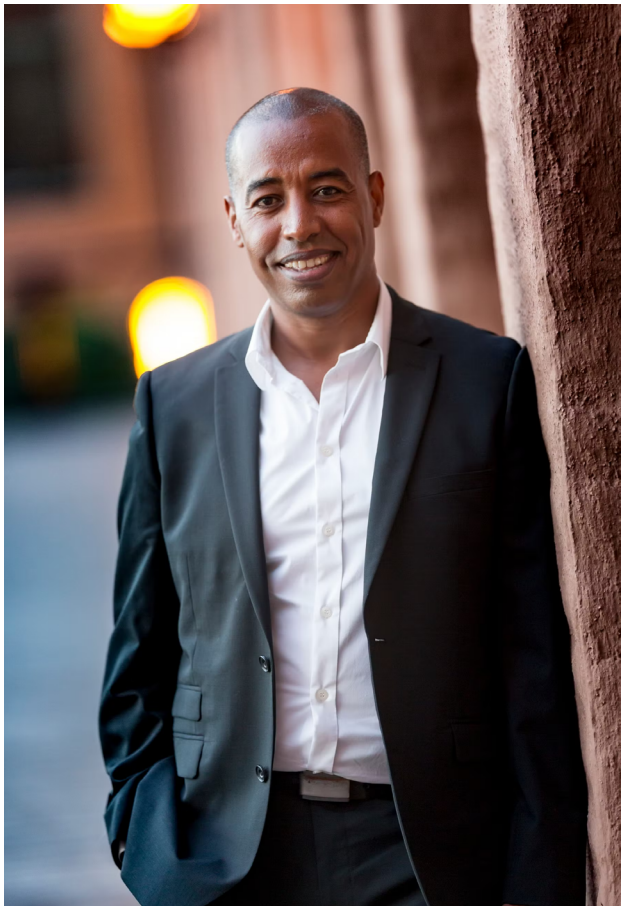
PANAF VOICES brings together perspectives from across our network and beyond, highlighting the diverse experiences of artists working in complex environments. Within these pages, readers will encounter critical analyses of the intersection between art and technology, the lived realities of artists in exile, reflections on how class and space influence creative production, and testimonies of how artistic voices persist even under the weight of repression. Collectively, these contributions offer a panoramic view of the state of artistic freedom in Africa today.

This magazine also reflects PANAF's commitment to providing platforms for dialogue, advocacy, and solidarity. It is designed not only to inform but also to inspire action by civil society, governments, policymakers, and international partners; towards safeguarding artistic freedom as a fundamental right and an essential ingredient for Africa's sustainable development.

As you engage with this first edition of PANAF VOICES, we invite you to see it as both a mirror of the challenges facing our creative sectors and a testament to the unyielding spirit of African artistry. May it serve as a resource for policymakers, a tool for advocates, and an inspiration for artists and audiences alike.

We thank our contributors, partners, and supporters whose commitment and collaboration have made this publication possible. Together, let us continue to defend the right to create, to imagine, and to express ourselves without fear or limitation.

Teshome Wondimu
Executive Director SELAM



Zimbabwe

How Not To Go TO Jail For Drawing Stuff

By Philani A. Nyoni

My concerns with international flights are usually mundane things like making sure my Swiss army knife is not in my carry-on luggage. Do I have anything in my pocket that I might have to part with at security? My passport is not in my suitcase, right? Will my MasterCard work? Do I have my documents and answers ready for Immigration? Where the hell is my charger and do I have enough of my own cigarettes for the stay? Ordinary people stuff. When I was leaving for Kenya in July of 2025, I had new concerns: my father, gravely unwell at the time, how was he faring? And, of course, how would I make sure they didn't find 28 grams of *dagga* in my luggage?

The problem starts in 2010. While catching up on Zimbabwean news from the computer lab at the University of Witwatersrand, I came across a story that gilds the aphorism "truth is stranger than fiction" and learnt the name Owen Maseko.

Perhaps the story doesn't even start in 2010; it could begin in the early 1980s. While the world looked at Zimbabwe, newly minted from the scrap metal of Rhodesia to join the ranks of liberated countries, her government, led by then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, was casually killing people like Owen Maseko and me - people of Ndebele descent.

The official term of the operation was *Gukurahundi:* a Shona word for the first rains that wash away the chaff. Mugabe would later call it "a moment of madness" while the Catholic Commission called it a genocide. The current president of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has recently suggested commissions of enquiry be established to look into the events that lasted about five years, between 1982 and 1897. Meanwhile, enquiring minds would like to know how he feels about his frontline role in the "madness" - seeing as he was the State Security Minister at the time - as well as the modalities of how the blade commands the wound to heal.

Noviolet Bulawayo would use this gruesome time as the backbone of her second novel, *Glory*, as I did with my last publication, *The Testament of Black Jesus*. Before all that, in 2010, with nowhere to turn for answers, and inspired by an entire ethnic group still reeling, Owen did the unimaginable: he coaxed, out of his **art hand** , an exhibition of paintings, installations, and murals interrogating the Great Taboo. He named it *Sibathontisele*, which translates to "Let's drip on them" from the Ndebele. As Owen pointed out in *I Am Patience*, our 2022 pocumentary (a documentary narrated in poetry; totally, totally normal), the dripping of hot plastic onto human flesh was a common method of torture used by the Fifth Brigade. He was also dripping creativity onto *Them*; writing back to the empire: canvass for mangled bodies, red paint the lore of gore.

Now, between you and me, genocidal maniacs don't like being called out for their shit. So they shut him down before the day was done. Owen was thrown into jail, alongside Vote Thebe, who was then the director of the National Art Gallery in Bulawayo. The theatre was absurd, the script writing itself, even his custodians failed to comprehend: "We arrested you for... drawings?" Yes, they had; officially charged him with "undermining the authority of the president".

Voti made it out sooner, but Owen's ordeal had only just begun... since he had been caught, eh... red-handed. To continue with our garish puns, the trial transcript is pure courtroom drama; for example, when the arresting officer is asked how the artworks undermine the president's authority, he says that the artist should not have depicted the dear president... like... that. And then the defence lawyer asks: *Who told you that is the president?* After a drawn-out process (the bad puns are not stopping anytime soon), the result is a win for the artist, and a legal precedent nobody wishes to ever invoke, because who wants to go to jail for art? Speaking for writers, we all want to be Ngũgĩ, but nobody wants to be Ngũgĩ.

It's the stuff of legend and nightmares, how telling stories becomes a crime.

Genocidal maniacs don't like being called out for their shit."

Owen's hard-fought battle changed his life entirely. For starters, his circle of friends became tighter. Trusting people became harder. Also, when you have the stink of the law about you, nobody wants to stick around and become guilty by association, so even the work stopped coming in - never mind that his case had to go all the way to the Supreme Court - and phrases like "freedom of expression and conscience as guaranteed by the Constitution" were thrown about. He also lost his family through divorce.

If it's any consolation, Owen was the runner-up for the 2010 Freedom to Create Prize. Some have suggested he would have placed first had Cont Mhlanga, a Zimbabwean writer, film and theatre-maker not received it two years prior; nonetheless, placing second from a pool of 1700 artists from 127 countries puts some perspective on the dampness of the entire affair and the time. It's a fascinating story right out of the oppression Bible if such a thing ever existed: throw a guy into jail for depicting things that actually happened.

As for the exhibition itself? The entire space and its walls, red with paint like massacre, remained cordoned off through half a decade. It was a fiery legend that we could only glimpse from the pavements of Leopold Takawira Avenue, or the upper level of the gallery that opened down into the forbidden space. Eventually, the windows were taped up with newspapers, then sealed off with black-tinted film. Ironically, the week before writing this, someone in the Zimbabwean government had decided that no vehicle should have blacked-out windows unless it's government or security. Why? I'm glad you asked: "Because tinted windows conceal criminal activities". I finally experienced the work in 2015 when Owen was allowed to take it down. One would have hoped that that would close the circle of absurdity: an exhibition that occupied a space for five years was only seen twice.

During that Kenyan trip whose logistics were giving me new kinds of heartburn, I was to meet up with Karolina Jeppson to do some research on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, courtesy of the Swedish Authors' Foundation. Last year when I was in Sweden, I came across a reproduction of one of the paintings from Owen's exhibition in Jeppson's kitchen; unmistakable in its bold and brilliant red and blacks and, of course, the artist's signature.

"Interesting artwork," I said.

"Oh, I bought it in Kenya, during the exhibition at the Goethe Institute."

I may have gushed some version of his story: the genocide, the exhibition, the arrest, and most importantly that he was my friend with whom I had created trophies for the Regional Centre For Cooperate Social Responsibility when I still worked there in 2013, published books with him when I wrote *Mars His Sword*, and a whole lot of other projects that saw us not sleeping for days on end, chasing impossible deadlines when printing machines, cameras or kilns would not be rushed. I had my cigarettes to keep me awake, he had his tea. Maybe I just smiled and pondered how small the world is, and asked to take a selfie to show Owen how far his work and its spirit had gone.

I think I was also sad, that this inspirational and phenomenal work that rewrote the country's legal apparatus was pariah in its home, became, like Coriolanus, a hero banished. What a thankless, lonely road we travel. Maybe it's not about the thanks, but about what must be done; art, first of all, is cathartic. There was something healing in seeing that piece of canvas in that Scandinavian kitchen; even while we are being silenced, our story matters.

Owen's exhibition has travelled to places like Norway, Kenya, Egypt, London, South Africa, and has allowed him to speak on panels about art, expression and oppression in many other spaces. Unfortunately, he could not travel with it to Ireland earlier this year.

You see, Owen Maseko has locs. Locs are the mark of Rastafarians. Rastafarians (are presumed to) smoke weed. It's all logical; back when I wore my hair long, I became accustomed to being accosted for *ganja* by the cops. Sometimes I would let them search me, and call them names while they were at it. Once, they even asked for the password to my phone because if they couldn't find drugs on me, they'd find pornography in my phone. Sometimes I would tell them I'd already smoked it. In the November of 2018, walking past the High Court towards the Harare Gardens for the official opening of the Harare International Literature Festival, I was instructed to produce a spliff by some chaps from the Presidential Guard.

"Well, gentlemen, I don't carry when I'm at work." It was easier than saying I don't partake. I was summoned to a small circle, where, upon arrival, my lit cigarette was confiscated, and a joint thrust upon me. Of course I smoked it; though four

"Even while we are being silenced, our story matters.

months into sobriety, for I am not in the business of arguing with men with guns, particularly while they are doing drugs... at the High Court.

My dreadlocks weren't that impressive, but Owen on the other hand, has a Bob Marley mane. So, when he was caught with 28 grams of cannabis on the 13th of June 2025 at the Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo International airport while attempting to travel to Ireland with his incendiary exhibition, it was understandable, right? Right? Except I had never seen him with as much as rolling paper. So, I wondered, when did Owen start doing drugs? I'm sure fifteen years ago was a better time to pick up a habit.

Maybe I was asking the wrong questions. You see, once upon a time, Xitha Magetha, a South African poet and friend, came through the same airport and was interrogated on the purpose of his visit then made to sign a document that explicitly said he would not do anything associated with his work while on a tourist visa. And so, during his stay, I was scared shitless we would all be hauled off to jail each time I saw him hold a pen. So what should I have been asking myself? What was the right question? Here's one: What did the musician Vusa Mkhaya mean - right after *They* "caught" Owen with drugs - when he said travelling via the Bulawayo airport is now scary for artists? If anything like that happened to me, it would kill my father.

At least I would be flying from Harare. That must be safer, right? And fly safe I did; no incidents at the security checkpoints, smooth sailing (yes, sailing, if it has port and starboard lights, it's a ship). I was hoping to see some people in Nairobi, including Zenzo Nyathi, a good friend, veteran stage and television actor. Unfortunately, he was in Mombasa when I arrived, attending some conference or other on Theatre Policy Advocacy. I did not get to see him before he flew back to Zimbabwe a week later.

Zenzo's arrival was not without incident. Despite travelling light, with no checked-in luggage, and one of the first to clear entry formalities, he was the last to leave. He tells of a

gentleman accompanied by a lady asking for his passport then interrogating him on the purpose of his visit to Kenya, demanding documents – invitations, source of funding, and so forth - to collaborate his story; that he was merely attending workshops and not performing, as if what he performs in a different time zone should be any of their morbid concern. The scariest part? These civilian-dressed inquisitors did not identify themselves but made it clear that *They* knew a lot about Zenzo and his career. *We are watching.*

It's the stuff of legend and nightmares, how telling stories becomes a crime. And yes, the irony is that the story ends up writing itself, for we are not conjurors. To fight us is to fight the mirror. We are only servants of the fastest thing in the universe: light; much faster than bullets.

When I came back home, it was without airport incident. Before that week was done, we carried my father to the hospital where I was born. Not another word did he utter again.

“To fight us is to fight the mirror. We are only servants of the fastest thing in the universe: light.”

Nigeria

Humor is Not A Joke: A Situation Analysis of Artistic Freedoms in Nigeria - A Cartoon Draws Blood!

By Tope Olatidoye

In March 2025, I posted a single-panel cartoon on a civic WhatsApp group that caricatured the Supreme Court: a judge in full wig, a smiling, hulking anarchical figure beside a broken gavel. It was meant as a provocation — a civic jab that asked whether a court's public trust can survive repeated, controversial decisions.

In this case, I was questioning the role Nigeria's apex court had played in preparing the illegal grounds for the unconstitutional suspension of the elected governor of Rivers State in the oil-rich Niger Delta region which had been the scene of many conflicts around resource control and rival politics. The reaction was immediate. Group messages ranged from sarcasm to outright threats. One respondent typed, "Go commit a crime and let your case get to the Supreme Court — I want to check something." The joke had not landed as a joke; it was a test.

That exchange is not an isolated outrage; it's a tiny weather vane. The barrage of abuse, the quick escalation from critique to menace, and the invocation of criminality as a retort reveal how fragile public satire has become.

In Nigeria, mocking power — even in a small civic space — can trigger legal alarms, social shaming, and organized campaigns of trolling that function as a form of extra-judicial censorship. The cartoon and the reaction around it are a microcosm: creative dissent colliding with legal instruments, moral outrage and digital mobs down the timeline of Nigeria's nationhood.

From satire to statute: the long shadow of the law

Suppression of artistic expression first appeared against Nigerian theatre's early pillars. Hubert Ogunde, a dramatist who frequently used ethnic Yoruba folkore and oral traditions in his plays to critique colonial rule and later government corruption was one of the earliest targets of creative suppression His play *Yoruba Ronu (Yorubas, Think!)*, staged in 1964, was such a searing political statement that it was banned in the Western Region of Nigeria in the post-colonial era. The ban was lifted only in 1966 after a change ofgovernment. Ogunde's other works — *Strike and Hunger, Otito Koro (Truth is Bitter)* — similarly tackled political themes.

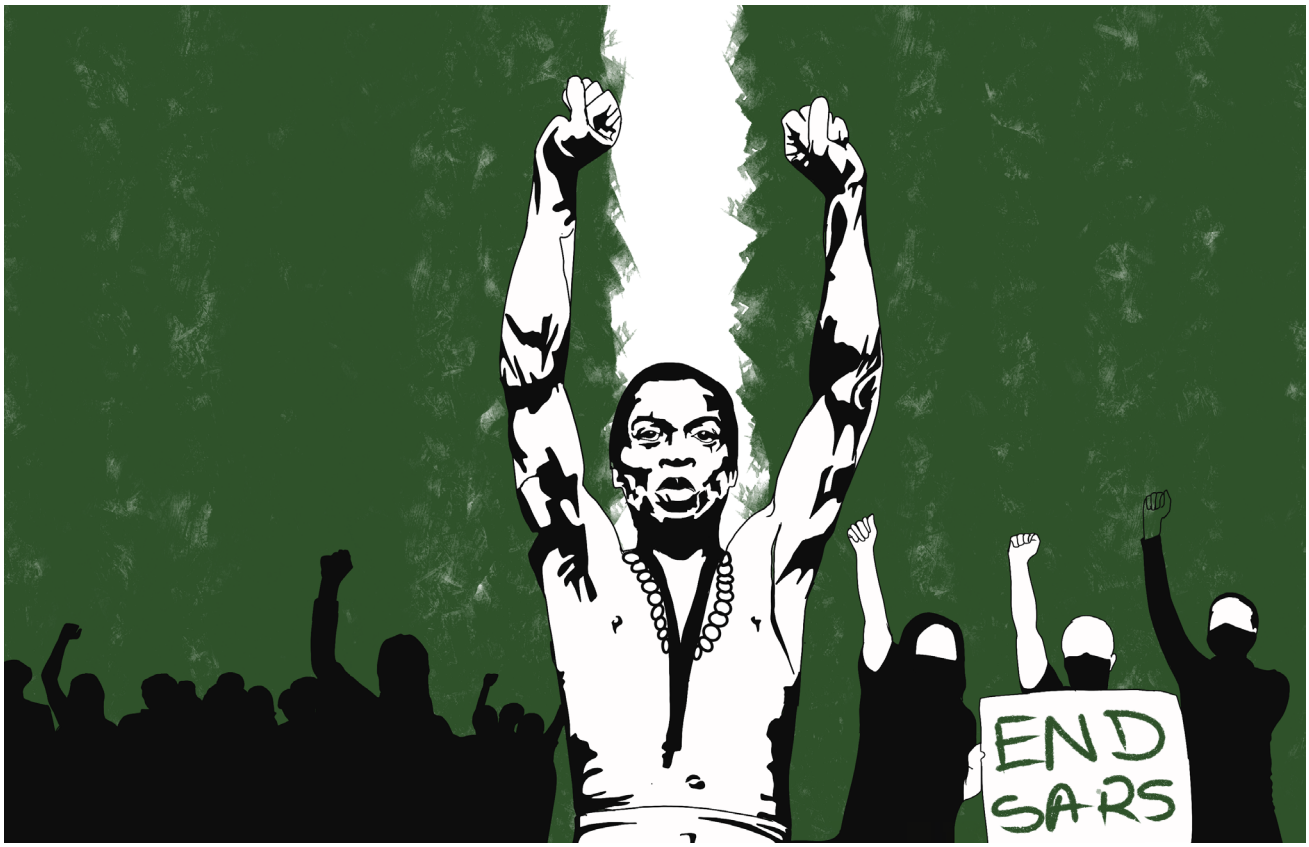
Also, when Wole Soyinka - another leading dramatist who was imprisoned for his civic activism to prevent the escalation of the Nigerian Civil war in 1967 - published his experience in a memoir, *The Man Died (1972)*, one of the figures named in the book *brought a libel suit* against him that was as much about silencing political memory as protecting reputations. Military regimes (which had governed the country for 29 years since its independence in 1960) largely suppressed and constrained artistic expression. One of the earliest and most vivid examples of suppression comes from the case of *Fela Anikulapo Kuti*, the pioneer of afrobeat, a musical genre he used for strong social activism and commentary. In 1970, Fela Kuti founded the *Kalakuta Republic*, declaring it a space independent of Nigeria's military regime. His music, increasingly political, exposed government brutality, corruption, and hypocrisy. The raid of Kalakuta in 1977 is infamous: approximately 1,000 soldiers stormed his compound, burned down Kalakuta, destroyed

his recording studio, beat Fela up, and fatally injured his mother Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti after throwing her from a second-floor window. Fela's instruments, master tapes, and the infrastructure of his commune were destroyed. Fela channelled this atrocity into music, penning *Coffin for Head of State and Unknown Soldier*. His 1977 album *Zombie*, in particular, used satire and metaphor to indict the military.

Censorship tightened under successive military regimes, targeting platforms that enabled artistic expression. In 1978, a special News Agency of Nigeria was created to *vet content* to be broadcast on radio and television and, after the 1983 coup, the army itself took charge of monitoring information (Generals don't read novels", one writer *observed*). Set up in 1993, the National Film & Video Censors Board began banning movies *deemed indecent or subversive*.

Fast-forward to the 2020s and the pattern of suppression of artistic expression in Nigeria continues, albeit with a different dynamic because of the expansion of internet-based technologies and increasing globalization. Moreover, the legal instruments for constraining artistic expression — libel suits, criminal defamation, sharia-based blasphemy charges, broadcasting codes — have continued to raise the cost of creative social commentary and public opinion. Even copyright law has played a role. For example, Nigeria's *new Copyright Act* does not fully restore "freedom of panorama", the principle that allows citizens to photograph, share, or remix images of public artworks and buildings without fear of infringement claims. According to *Free Knowledge Africa*, this gap means that murals, monuments, or architectural works visible in public can still be restricted from circulation, undermining both digital creativity and civic memory. In effect, even where the streets become galleries of protest, the law lingers in ways that can chill their reproduction or global reach.

During the #EndSARS protests by Nigerian youths against police brutality (particularly the excesses, extortion and high-handedness of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad [SARS], a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police Force created supposedly to curb violent crimes like armed robbery) in October 2020, art broke out of studios and spilled onto the streets. Protesters used murals, banners, graffiti, and punchy slogans as visual calls to action. *Sòrò-Sókè* (Yoruba for *Speak Up*) became *not only a rallying cry but also a slogan* painted on walls and placards, later adapted to chants, songs, and even digital memes. Murals in Lagos and Abuja depicted clenched fists, bloodied flags, and the faces of victims of police brutality, transforming cityscapes into living canvases of grief and defiance. Protest lyrics too — whether improvised chants or remixed pop songs including classic tunes from Fela Anikulapo Kuti — blurred the lines between performance and protest, echoing Nigeria's longer tradition where music and visual art become civic weapons when institutions fail to protect.



“Creative dissent collides with legal instruments, moral outrage and digital mobs down the timeline of Nigeria’s nationhood.”

Nationwide protests caused by widespread economic hardship, including the removal of fuel subsidies, staggering inflation, and the rising cost of living broke out in August 2024. Going by the hashtags #EndBadGovernace or #EndBadGovernaceInNigeria, the protests were driven in large part by artistic expressions using a variety of mediums such as music, poetry and visual art. For example, there was a *call for poems* by a state chapter of the Association of Nigerian Authors for an anthology capturing “the emotions, experiences and thoughts of Nigerians on #EndBadGovrnance”. Street anthems such as *Nigeria Jaga Jaga*, a reference to a popular protest song by *Eedris Abdulkareem* critiquing the country’s mismanagement and corruption, appeared again to strengthen the voices of discontent (*Tell Your Papa*, Eedris Abdulkareem’s sequel release addressing the same issue, was *banned* by NBC, the broadcasting regulator, in April 2025). The mood of the #EndBadGovernace or #EndBadGovernaceInNigeria was also captured through a mix of visual expressions, from cartoons on the *front pages of leading newspapers* to street graffiti.

For the average Nigerian, artistic freedom is both celebrated and feared. On the one hand, there is pride in how murals, music, and poetry have amplified protest movements, from Fela’s afrobeat, to Eedris AbdulKareem’s serial protest hits, to the chants of *Sòrò-Sókè* in 2020. Nigerians value art as a mirror of society and as a way of “speaking truth to power” when institutions fall short. But at the same time, many citizens are conscious of the risks that come with bold expression. In northern states, for example, comedians and musicians know that a skit or song judged “blasphemous” can attract heavy penalties — as in the case of Yahaya Sharif-Aminu, who was sentenced to death by a Sharia court in Kano on accusations of sharing an alleged religiously offensive song on a a WhatsApp group in 2020, a case that *UN experts continue to condemn*. Even secular laws like the Cybercrimes Act (amended in 2024) are widely perceived as tools that allow the state to criminalize “offensive” posts, leading ordinary Nigerians to self-censor online. The result is a cautious appreciation of the power of art — citizens often celebrate defiant artists in private, while hesitating to defend them openly for fear of social or legal backlash.

Moral and cultural pressures also shape everyday attitudes towards creative expression. Many Nigerians are protective of art that respects faith and tradition, but conservative clerics or advocacy groups can quickly mobilize against works they deem indecent or offensive. The case of Kano TikTok star Murja Ibrahim Kunya, who was *arrested* in 2023 after clerics demanded her detention, illustrates how public opinion can be swayed against artists through moral campaigns. Even in the south, cultural groups like the Muslim Rights Concern often threaten lawsuits against musicians or filmmakers whose works “offend religious sensibilities”. For many Nigerians, this creates a climate of double consciousness: they enjoy satire, protest songs, or daring murals when these works affirm frustrations with the government, but they also instinctively police boundaries around religion, sexuality, or community image. This ambivalence means that artistic freedom in Nigeria is not just constrained by law or state power, but also by the unwritten rules of society itself.

To address these systemic attitudes, Unchained Vibes Africa, an art collective, launched the *Free the Vibes* project in December 2021. *Free the Vibes* is a monthly series of conversations and performances hosted at Freedom Park in Lagos that puts artistic freedom at the centre of civic debate. It mixes performances — from hip-hop acts to poetry and drumming — with robust conversations about censorship, hate speech laws, and government clampdowns. This initiative is unique in that it isn’t just a showcase of talent; it is designed as a living forum where artists, activists, and audiences connect the dots between creativity and democracy. Its founder, Ayo Ganiu, frames the project as *both advocacy and intervention*, stepping in when musicians, comedians, or filmmakers are harassed, and using the platform to remind Nigerians that the right to create freely is not a luxury but a constitutional guarantee.

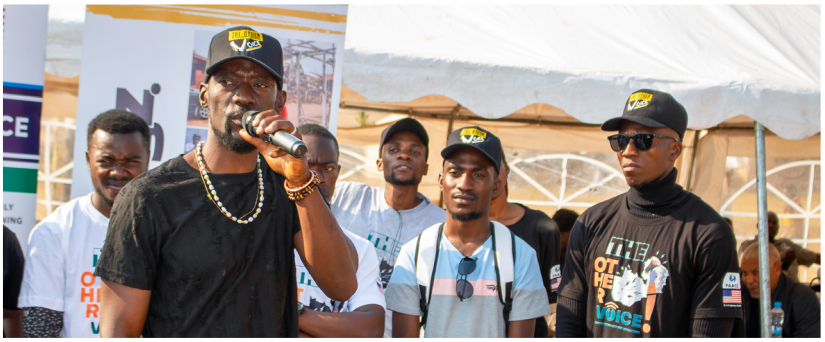
“Artistic freedom in Nigeria is not just constrained by law or state power, but also by the unwritten rules of society itself.”

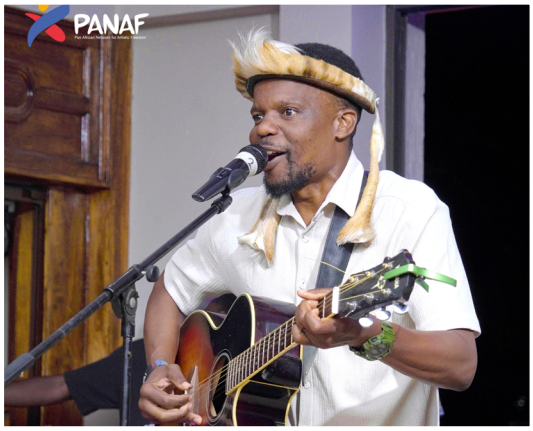
Free the Vibes responds to a culture of repression that artists know all too well: the quick arrests of performers who critique politicians, the silencing of songs branded "defamatory", and the weight of old military-era trauma that still lingers in Nigeria's creative industries. Speakers at the opening of *Free the Vibes* pointed to how artists often self-censor out of fear of fines, bans, or backlash from religious and cultural authorities. Veteran performers like Ade Bantu and Hilda Dokubo used the stage to call on artists to reclaim their voice as educators and agitators, and not just as entertainers. By linking the art of performance with the politics of freedom, *Free the Vibes* has carved out a space that is both cultural and political, a reminder that creativity in Nigeria is never just about glamour, but about survival and solidarity in the face of censorship.

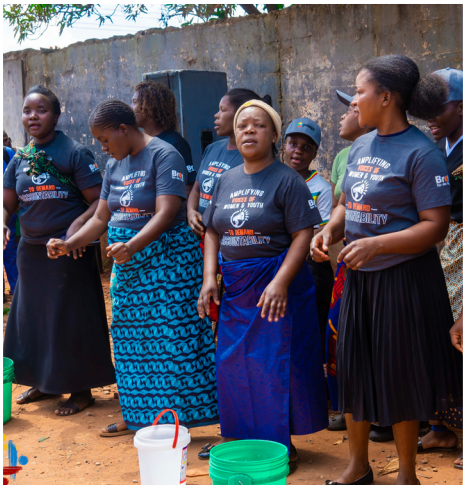
> **"The right to create freely is not a luxury but a constitutional guarantee."**

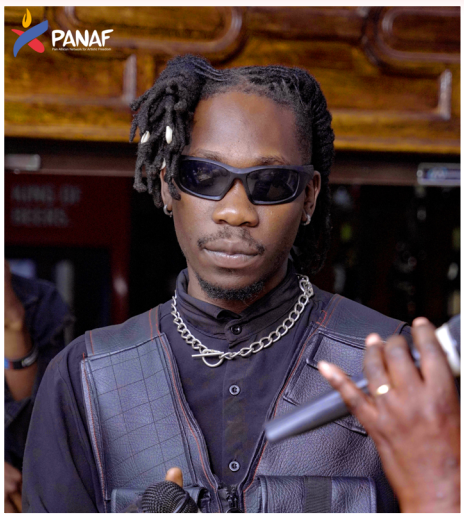
Partner Focus

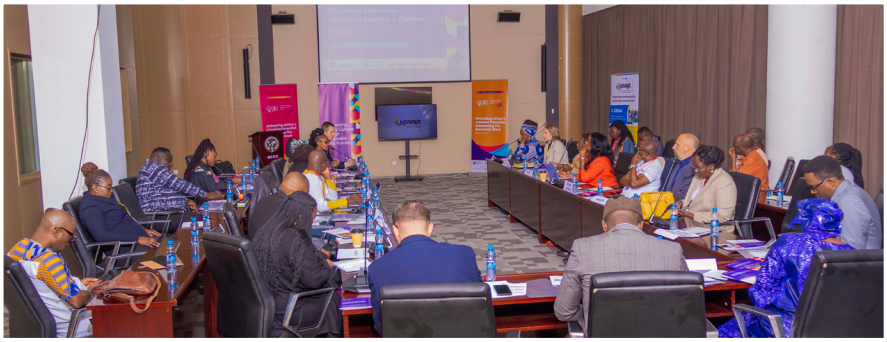
PAAGZ is a Zambian non-profit promoting governance and accountability since 2001. They empower marginalized women and youth to hold the government accountable for public funds and service delivery, focusing on socio-economic rights like education and healthcare. A distinctive focus is their creative advocacy, using art and digital platforms to make governance issues accessible. In this edition we feature their key highlights of the year for 2025.

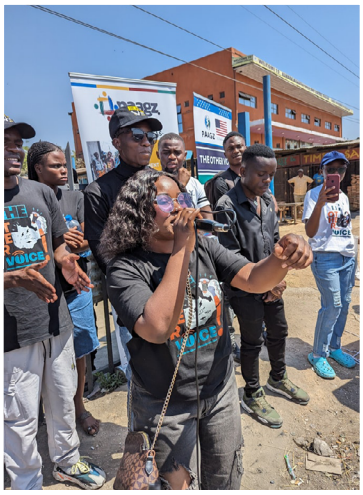










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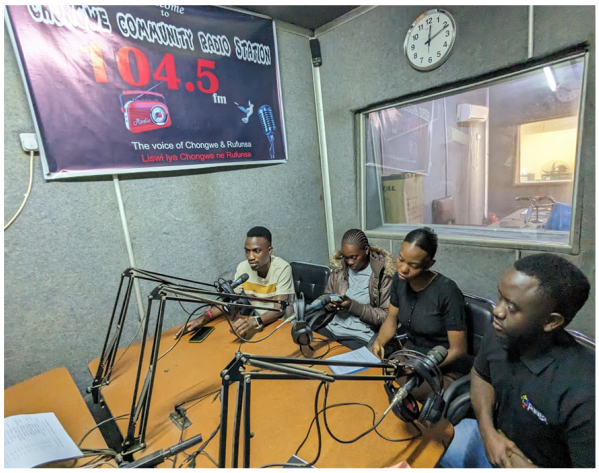
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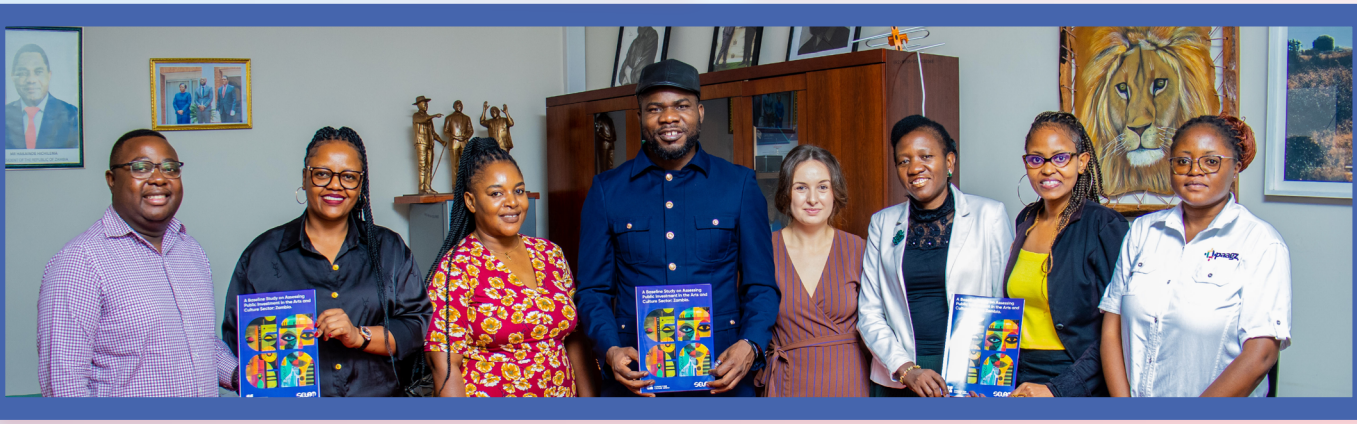


Uganda

As Long as You Don't Say Nothing, You Can Say Anything at All

Brief personal reflections of the arts, power and censorship in Uganda.

By Kalundi Serumaga

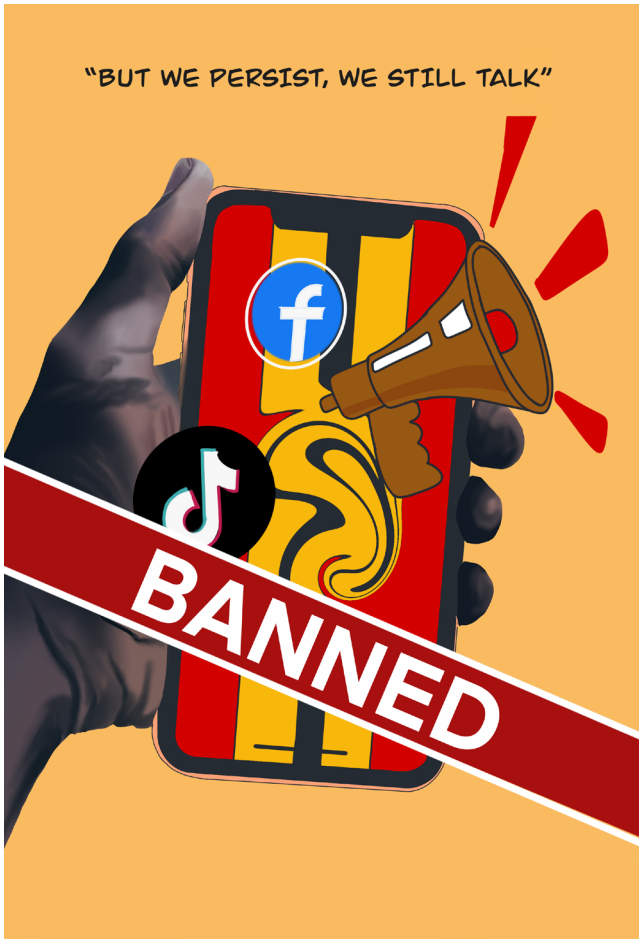
In Uganda, censorship is a reality, and in fact, a governance necessity. Once those governing us came to the realization that they cannot give the population what it needs, either because they don't want to, or because they are not able, then they have got to try to stop the conversation about governing. Why permit or encourage talk about something you know is not going to change? Why raise hope?

That becomes step one, the usual result of which is to then see the discourse migrate to creative spaces, where it operates in a much more multi-layered and subliminal way. This requires a different kind of management of that arts scene, as step two.

With political censorship, matters have been very clear for some time now. Vocal activists who say things that those in power find offensive now have a standard playbook against them. They get barred from as many media outlets as they can. In extreme cases, landlords can be persuaded to evict them from their homes and business premises. Media houses themselves can be banned, or their troublesome journalists harassed or dismissed. There have been reports of even the tax authorities being sent after the records of businesses owned by such critics. Social media influencers are brought on board to cast the predictable aspersions.

Social media platforms themselves can be shut down as a whole. During the contentious 2021 general election, there was a shutdown across the board. Up to today, Facebook remains banned. Then there are the abductions.

This is not to say it comes easy. The human is designed to see, reflect and speak. So political censorship has it challenges. Recently, some laws seeking to make digital democracy more punishable were thwarted. But in the



end, it gets done. Of late, there has been a steady stream of convictions of simple users of X (formerly Twitter) for making posts critical of important government figures. The longest sentence has been six years for the offence of insulting the president via TikTok.

The arts are a different kind of problem, requiring a different set of tools. Art is nebulous. It defies time and form. The key thing to understand is that there is a difference between freedom of speech, and freedom of expression. The Uganda arts sector has suffered over a two decades of deliberate sabotage in my view, and this is why I argue that arts censorship has thus been historically approached in a structural way.

> **Once those governing us realized they cannot give the population what it needs... they had to stop the conversation about governing."**

In terms of practical implementation of immediate measures, the lines between politics, art, media and morality are very blurred. Many personalities wear more than one hat, with prominent journalists also being politicians, musicians being opinion leaders, and politicians becoming entertainers.

So the goal has been to create an entirely plastic and artificial practice of noisy, energetic, colourful, but ultimately very hollow forms of "African" expression.

This is actually the best form of arts censorship; creative voices must be monitored, and then led astray.

The transformation of the singer Bobi Wine into the major opposition politician known as Robert Kyagulanyi was not the origin of this process, but became the occasion for its intensification.

There had been other political musicians, like Ronald Mayinja whose themes had become a source of quiet nervousness among the authorities. Various theories exist as to how he vanished from prominence, amid a flurry of mixed messaging.

The closest analogy I can think of is the analyses I have seen by and about certain pioneers of old-school Hip Hop in in the United States, such as Wise Intelligent, KRS-One, Chuck D and others, who say that the art form was hijacked.

Citing examples from original rap groups such as Roc Nation, they argue that the wider American power structure and society became worried about the political impact of rap music due to its articulation of Black political concerns about racism, imperialism, and poverty.

They say that the strategic response to this was to encourage the emergence of a new kind of Hip Hop practice, which was mainstreamed and made the dominant and more accessible kind. This was done through the manipulation and encouragement of entertainers more concerned with hedonistic themes in the way those in charge of the major recording companies signed up, curated, distributed and marketed them. The result is largely what became known as "Gangsta Rap".

They argue that this process was aimed at depoliticizing, or corrupting a valid art form with the purpose of derailing the radicalizing effect it was having on a new generation of, especially, Black American youth.

My title phrase, "As long as you don't say nothing, you can say anything at all," is an American expression (possibly from the singer Bob Dylan) to reflect this.

Apart from the usual lack of funding and deliberate appointment of unskilled people to manage the lead state institutions, censoship has also been done through the building of ignorance and falsehoods into our cultural discourse and historical memory. Because in the end, the absolutely certain way to ensure that people do not talk about the things that matter is to not let them know of the existence of those things to begin with. Or, failing that, not know about their significance in the wider scheme of things. Ignorance is a pre-emption. Co-option is a method.

> **The goal has been to create noisy, energetic, colourful, but ultimately very hollow forms of 'African' expression."**

Freedom of artistic expression in Uganda therefore depends on who the particular artist is, and what they are expressing. Some are extremely free, others are silenced.

My last personal experience of censorship was when I was asked to direct the one-man play *For My Negativity*, written and performed by Kgayi Ngobi, during the 2022 edition of the Kampala International Theatre Festival. Ngobi is a well-known performance poet with a number of works that excoriate the way we live now and the role of the government in creating it. I, for my part, just seem stuck with a name that appears on many an official blacklist going all the way back to 2009. Various stratagems were brought into effect to discourage either the venue, or the festival owners, or the festival sponsors from staging the play. In the end, and with not a little irony, it was the decision of the ambassador of one of the of the European Union countries that was among the event sponsors to be physically present at the performance that seemed to have kept at bay the scores of not very well disguised undercover intelligence cops mobilized to the venue.

The emergence of Bobi Wine into political visibility led the regime and its associates to seek to build a counter-industry to match his youth appeal. For a while, this literally created a busy marketplace among the creatives in which singers, in the main, chose which side they would sing for, or switch to. Concerts and counter-concerts, songs and counter-songs, and imagery and counter-imagery became the order of the day.

New bodies were hurriedly set up to "represent" these wiser artists, and at least one was granted office space at the National Cultural Centre. Some singers were even officially appointed "Presidential Advisors".

So the real censorship has been strategic and structural. This is actually very wise. Because a "fire-fighting" approach is much costlier, destabilizing and does not cover as many targets.

It has also been long-standing. Uganda, a country of fifty million people, has one public-owned art gallery, and one public-owned theatre, both of which are based in the capital, with no real upcountry sites. This builds exclusion, and discourages innovation. Arts programmes are essentially driven by some schools, or by embassies and their cultural institutes.

Whatever other facilities do exist are essentially private enterprises set up by heroic and dedicated individuals. Access and exposure requires money. The various national awards that were given out for the arts basically no longer exist. The only exception is a "national" film award, which is owned and managed by the Uganda Communications Commission. And that was largely to do to the film sector what the other initiatives have done to the music sector, at least.

But we persist. We will still talk.

"Freedom of artistic expression in Uganda depends on who the particular artist is, and what they are expressing."

East Africa

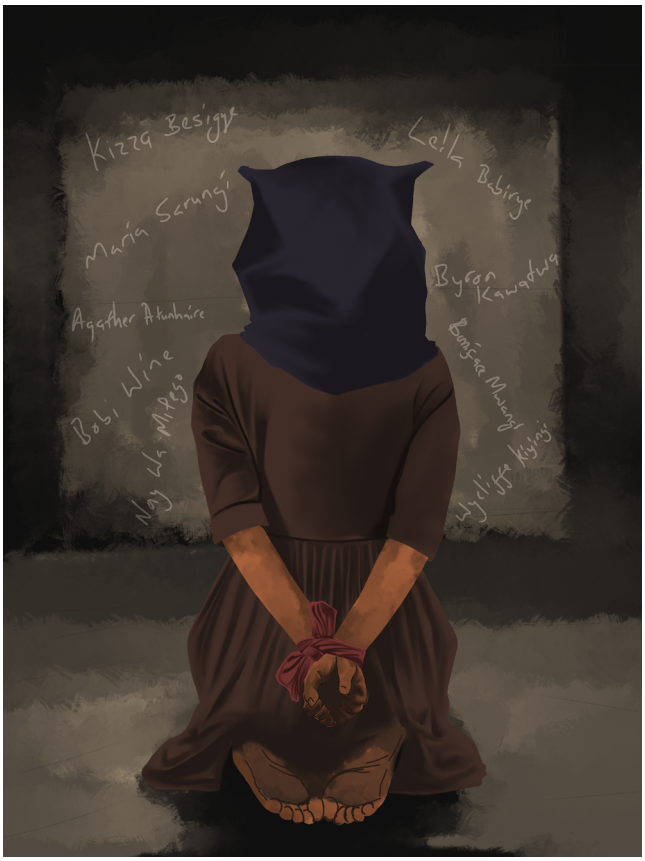
Artistic Repression Goes Regional In East Africa

By Joel Mukisa

Introduction | Coordinated Jumuiya transnational repression

In the recent past, our Jumuiya's democracy scales have been trembling with the impunity of human rights abuses and a worrying trend of transnational repression. One incident the chilled the conscience of all freedom loving East Africans was the brazen abduction of Ugandan opposition politician, Kizza Besigye, on 16 November 2024 in Kenya by unidentified assailants who bundled him into a vehicle together with FDC (Forum for Democratic Change) member Haji Obeid Lutale, and drove him across the border to Uganda without any formal extradition process. After suffering the ordeal of being held in incommunicado detention, Besigye was arraigned before the General Court Martial and charged with offences relating to security and the unlawful possession of firearms and ammunition, which could attract the death penalty. In July of the same year, 36 other members of the FDC party had been arrested in Kisumu, Kenya and forcibly deported to Uganda where they were charged with terrorism despite having lawfully entered Kenya with the necessary immigration permissions.

> **"Our Jumuiya's democracy scales have been trembling with the impunity of human rights abuses and a worrying trend of transnational repression."**



The Boniface Mwangi and Agather Atuhaire Torture and Deportation

Six months after the kidnap of Kizza Besigye from Kenya, Boniface Mwangi and Agather Atuhaire, who are prominent Kenyan and Ugandan human rights activists respectively, were abducted in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, while expressing solidarity with opposition leader Tundu Lissu. There is a thread of consistency in the way all these major East African nations (mis)treat their opposition politicians and Activists. Like Besigye, Tundu Lissu faces treason charges ahead of contentious elections in Tanzania. Agather and Boniface also not only endured days of incommunicado detention just like Besigye, but also reported suffering severe sexual torture, including rape and beatings by Tanzanian security forces.

> **The post-independent African states did not shake off the institutional legacy of colonialism, including the suppression of critical artistic expression."**

Since the cross-border snatch-and-transfer operation happened almost a year ago, Besigye and his counterpart Haji Obeid have not received due process contrary to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Similarly, the enforced disappearances and ill-treatment of Agather and Boniface breached the human rights protocols of the East African Community and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which all three countries are signatories.

There is a complex historical origin of artistic censorship in Africa, partly stemming from colonial policy. The post-independent African states did not shake off the institutional legacy of colonialism, including the suppression of critical artistic expression. Through the use of draconian laws, censorship boards, and internet restrictions, more East African countries have registered excesses against the freedom of artists.

Across the region, from the early 2000s-mid-2010s, there was a fusion of different forms of art, from graffiti and mural paintings to subversive visuals and performances by creative artists who defied authoritarianism.

Art Meets Gen Z Maandamano

In April 2025, the *Kenyan police fired tear gas* to disperse the audience that had gathered to watch Kenya's national high-school drama competition. This followed the staging of a play, Echoes of War, by Butere Girls High School. Kenyan authorities could not stomach a play, produced by students, set in a fictional kingdom where the youth have lost faith in their leaders. The play's author, Cleophas Malala, was also briefly detained by police.

Additionally, *Kenya published the Statute Law (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill 2020* in June 2020, with proposed amendments to the *Film and Stage Plays Act 1962 (Cap 222)*. The intention behind this move is to increase the reach and grasp of the *Kenya Films and Classification Board (KFCB)* to bolster its capacity for censorship of artistic works deemed critical of the regime. The following month in the same year, Tanzania passed a new law, the *Electronic and Postal Communications Act (EPOCA), on Online Content Regulations 2020*, to tighten state restrictions on freedom of expression under the pretext of "morality" and national security. What the foregoing laws do is impose criminal prosecutions against grassroots satirists and online artists, further curbing dissent.

Although digital media provided a platform for *political participation* and democratic expression in the recent #GenZ protests in Kenya, when young people challenged the retrogressive Finance Bill 2024, it did not come without challenges. There were reports of the Kenyan government colluding with some of the digital platforms to use automated moderation and limit the visibility of protest art amid the Gen Z-led demonstrations.

> **What these laws do is impose criminal prosecutions against grassroots satirists and online artists, further curbing dissent."**

Dictator Mama Samia

In Tanzania, although Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the ruling party, enjoys support from several prominent artists who compose praise songs for party leaders, it remains intolerant of any ounce of criticism from other critical artists. One of these is *Nay Wa Mitego*, a rapper who has been persecuted several times for his creative work. In September 2024, he was arrested after the Tanzania national arts council accused him of inciting against government abductions and slandering the president in his song, *Nitasema* (I Shall Speak). During President Magufuli's tenure, he had also faced arrests, charges, threats, and bans due to producing music deemed critical of the government.

Into the bargain, in October 2023, three of Tanzania's leading newspapers – *The Citizen, Mwananchi* and *Mwanaspoti* – were proscribed from publishing their online editions and had their *licences suspended for 30 days* after

they ran an animation deemed critical of President Samia Suluhu Hassan. This followed the publishing of a video clip which highlighted the increasing cases of abductions and disappearances in the country.

Basata's Overreach

In November 2018, Tanzania's national arts council, Baraza la Sanaa Tanzania (BASATA) *banned* Diamond Platnumz and Rayvanny's popular song, "Mwanza," and slapped the artists with a hefty fine, claiming the song was "too vulgar" to be played in the country. The board ordered the label Wasafi Records to remove the track from all digital platforms, and ensure it is never played again on the radio or in clubs in Tanzania.

In 2023, Tanzanian music sensations *Whozu, Mbosso, and Billnass* were heavily fined and banned from participating in artistic activities for a three-month period, starting from November 4, 2023 over a controversial music video, *Ameyatimba*.

Maria Sarungi's Abduction

Having left Tanzania for Kenya four years earlier following threats of arrest and the *banning* of her *media outlet*, Maria was *abducted* in Kenya in January 2025 and feared her assailants planned to force her back to Tanzania because of her critical social media posts. Ironically, The road where Maria's kidnapping occurred is named after *Charles Argwings Kodhek* (1923-1969), the first native lawyer in Kenya and East Africa who was also an early nationalist figure and a member of the labour movement. Maria was *freed* and left on a "rough road, in a dark place".

Mange Kimambi's Activism and Exile

Another prominent Tanzanian activist, Mange Kimambi, who had been enlisted by the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party in 2015 to push for John Magufuli's presidential bid, was later forced into exile having weaponised her platform against Magufuli's regime for its crackdown on press freedoms. With over 2.1 million followers now, Mange's Road to exile began around 2016-2017 amid escalating backlash for her determination to *criticise* the Tanzanian government's corruption and service failures, culminating in her forced exile the United States.

Historical Roots of Artistic Censorship in Uganda

Some Ugandan artists may feel that the increased restrictions against their work today are due to the political emergence of Bobi Wine, a vibrant and disruptive opposition politician whose key to fame was music. However, they would be remiss to forget that some of the laws providing the pretext for *blocking Bobi Wine's concerts* were passed during the British colonial rule! The government can ban performances, censure artworks, revoke work permits of creatives, arrest artists, and even shut down venues where artists are scheduled to perform by relying on a *law* passed in September 1943 by the British colonial authorities. The British also *prosecuted* any artist who practised their traditional dances and culture, which were deemed satanic and obscene.

"The law and politics are often weaponised against artistic freedom because art is rich with the capacity to express issues vividly and seriously, yet with creative entertainment."

However, this had not always been the case. Whereas some precolonial African societies had patronage systems and centralised censorship, whereby artistic works were commissioned and controlled by royal courts, artists enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom because art was integrated into daily life and was at the centre of spirituality and identity. Therefore, the limitations against artistic expression that were registered widely in the post-colonial era were largely inherited from the colonial legacy, which had weaponised politics against art.

Abuse of Artistic Freedom in Post-Independence Uganda

And so, it happened that in 1965, *Wycliffe Kiyingi* and the entire cast of his artistic radio show, *Wokulira*, were arrested, and the show was banned by Milton Obote's government. For writing an article critical of the government in their literary magazine, *Transition*, Abu Mayanja and Rajat Neogy were arrested in 1968. For writing The Burdens and Covenant with Death, the playwright *John Ruganda* was forced into exile in 1973, fearing for his life. For producing his

cryptic play, *Amayirikiti*, Robert Serumaga, another playwright of great stature in Ugandan literature, was also forced into exile following negative interpretations of the play by the Idi Amin regime. For staging the play, *Oluyimba Iwa Wankoko*, Byron Kawadwa became a martyr of Ugandan literature at the hands of Amin's rogue agents in 1977, because the play was interpreted as mocking the Amin regime through its depiction of a tyrannical rooster-king.

The Hybrid State of Artistic Freedom Under the NRM

Beyond combat, the National Resistance Army (NRA) War that shot President Museveni into power was cheered up by artists, some of whom formed higher and lower ranks of the guerrilla force, including Gen. Elly Tumwine and Sergeant Steven Kifulugunyu, respectively.

Outside of the NRA ranks, civilian artists also composed songs that decried the breakdown of social order and public service delivery under the Obote II regime, and supported the liberation struggle with songs of praise and encouragement for the fighters and their leader, Yoweri Museveni. One of these artists was Peter Baligidde, who composed *Agawalajana Mulukoola*, a popular song in the 1980s which President Obote's regime had banned due to interpretations of its message that alluded to the degradation of political stability under the regime, and applauded the struggle by the NRA guerrillas.

Upon taking power, there was widespread hope that Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) would respect human rights, especially the right to freedom of expression, since it was one of the reasons they had launched a protracted war five years earlier. According to Eckhard Breitinger, in 1986, more than 400 theatrical groups registered as members of the Ugandan Theatrical Groups Association, signalling the optimism with which cultural activists perceived this new era of unprecedented freedom of expression.

In its early days, the NRM seemed committed to protecting and empowering the freedom of artistic expression. It illustrated this by, among other ways, returning Wycliffe Kiyingi's *Wokulira* radio serial. Through the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, and statutory bodies like the Uganda National Cultural Centre (UNCC, the government seemed to encourage and support the development of cultural and artistic activities. Through teaching Music, Dance and Drama (MDD), schools were also vibrant nurseries for artistic talent.

Creative arts also played a significant role in mobilising the Ugandan population to contain major national challenges, especially the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the restoration of peace and reconciliation in areas ravaged by civil war, especially in northern Uganda. Poems and songs were written and performed regularly by pupils and students about all those challenges. Therefore, the government had a direct benefit and critical incentive to promote the freedom of artistic expression.

However, over time, the NRM government has increasingly constrained the space for artistic expression in Uganda. Today, cartoonists like Jimmy Spire Ssentongo, a Ugandan academic who employs art to campaign against the widespread corruption in government, have reported threats against their lives. In the past, the government used to charge editors of newspapers which critically caricatured the president with sedition. In 2017, musician David Mugema and his producer Jonathan Muwanguzi were arrested and charged with offensive communication for disturbing the peace of President Museveni. This followed their releasing a song, *Wummula*, which was interpreted as demanding that the president retire from his long stay in power.

In 2012, the Uganda Media Council suspended performances of *State of the Nation*, a play that highlighted corruption and poor governance in Uganda under President Museveni. The play had been produced to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Uganda's independence, on 9 October.

Several artists have been arrested or suffered in some way due to the interference of the state against their freedom of artistic expression. One of the bright careers that were ended by the misapplication of the law by the state prosecutors was Producer Didi, who was arrested in 2014, and his studio equipment was forfeited by the government on account of producing the song *Panadol Wa Basajja*, which was claimed to contain pornographic content. Although Didi was eventually found innocent, his life has been ruined since.

Artistic Resistance and Innovation in the Face of Jumuyia Repression

Nevertheless, the high-handed and imperious abuse of artistic freedom by East African states has not gone without incident. Young, vibrant artists have evolved to invent new and bold forms of expression to surmount state censorship.

Leila Babirye, a queer Ugandan, is one of those young East Africans blending creative expression with political critique and human rights activism. When she realised that the space

> **Young, vibrant artists have evolved to invent new and bold forms of expression to surmount state censorship."**

for sexual minorities to freely express themselves had been further constrained by the passing of the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda in 2023, she ingeniously found ways to address the realities of being gay in Uganda and Africa in general through art. Her sculpture artwork turns everyday materials into objects that address issues surrounding identity, sexuality and human rights. Leila collects debris from the streets of New York that has been whittled, welded, burned and burnished, and chisels it into beautiful sculptures, symbolising the reclamation of the disgraceful treatment of LGBTQI identities in Africa. Through her artwork, she expresses herself in ways that the government cannot restrict, furthering the cause of human rights.

When the Ugandan government denied Bobi Wine access to any public venues for his concerts, limiting his right as an artist to perform and earn, he innovatively held *digital concerts* at his private beach and home, further escaping state limitations.

When Tanzanian authorities *banned bloggers* recently ahead of the 2025 national elections, Maxence Melo's platform, *Jamii Forums*, resisted the blogger shutdowns. In Kenya, a subculture has evolved for self-expression and *social commentary on matatus* (public mini-buses), which are avenues for integrating hip-hop, graffiti and reggae music that addresses socioeconomic, political, and cultural themes relevant to urban youth. Tanzanian youth creatives and initiatives like Wachata Collective's urban murals have also adopted *street art* as an avenue for socio-political expression. Luta Ferdinand was a member of the Alternative Social Movement, a Ugandan pressure group. In February 2021, he *publicly flogged an effigy*, which came to be widely referred to as a makeshift dummy of the Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni. Armed with a loudspeaker and a stick, he accused the effigy of electoral malpractice and punished it with disfiguring whips. Arrested, the police charged him with common nuisance under the Penal Code Act. A year later, Luta revealed to the media that upon arrest, he was *tortured* and later charged in a military court with being in possession of military stores before being remanded to Kitalya prison.

The law and politics are often weaponised against artistic freedom because art is rich with the capacity to express issues vividly and seriously, yet with creative entertainment. With his life-size effigy sculpture, Luta made a spectacle of a powerful political figure, rendering justice to a perpetrator that the formal justice system could not apprehend.

It is easy for Luta, the creative artist, to be overshadowed by his political activism. But in truth, it is his art that has the power to socially shame a public figure and bring them to account in the court of public opinion. However, African artists and activists persist in their pursuit of artistic freedom, recognising the transformative power of art in shaping societies. We should recognise the power of art to provoke thought, challenge conventions, and ignite social change. Africa is one of the most culturally diverse continents, and our artistic talents must be supported to continue vibrantly expressing our identity, history, and contemporary realities. Art is therefore political.

> **African artists and activists persist in their pursuit of artistic freedom, recognising the transformative power of art in shaping societies."**

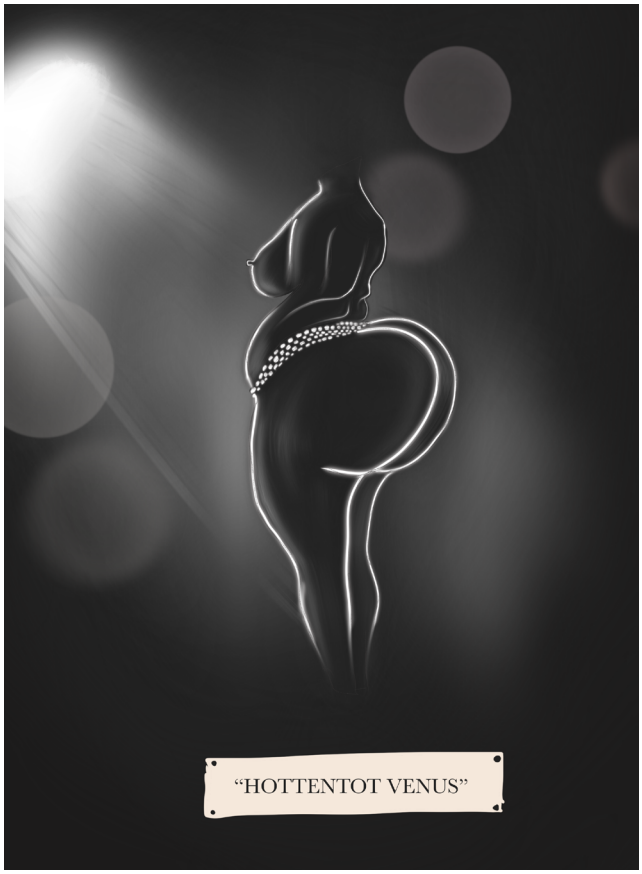
South Africa

Art by Rock Hard African Women

By Sanya Osha

Oftentimes, mass acts of violent rebellion primarily driven by youths are viewed as counter productive and nihilistic. But it is important to note that this isn't always the case as three major examples in African contemporary history demonstrate notably: the anti-colonial theory of violence proffered by Frantz Fanon that galvanised Algeria into civil disobedience and warfare during the colonial era; the Arab Spring that gripped North Africa and parts of the Middle East in 2011; and the #RhodesMustFall movement that rattled South Africa in 2015. Each of these instances of mass rebellion were largely youth-driven and shook the political status quo in their respective countries, leading to sociopolitical reform and fervent collective contemplation.

In this sense, rebellion in and of itself becomes a thoroughly creative act, a measure to shake up jaded and monolithic political edifices in urgent need of transformation as atrophy and retrogression set in within the body politic. Youths often excluded or marginalised in key decision-making bodies and processes are left with no option but to revolt. And in the act of rebellion they are not only offering their voice but also their signature as an essential component of the body politic. When dominant political structures become unresponsive to the needs and aspirations of the majority, when they become complacent and incapable of growth and innovation, then the rebellion of youth and other segments of the populace becomes not only unavoidable but also desirable. Indeed the desirability of revolt as a creative act is the line of thinking behind this discussion. Revolt as a massive glitch in the polity can also be viewed as a rite of purification, a collective cleansing of the communal being before renewed energies are unleashed for social reconstruction.



Having established that the physical act of actual revolt could sometimes have therapeutic and reconstructive properties, it is important to note that Africa has produced many contemporary female artists whose works stand as testaments to powerful creative agency within the continent and defiant feminist sensibilities.

"Strike a woman, strike a rock" (*imbokodo*) is a Zulu proverb that became popular after the 1956 women's march to Union Buildings in Pretoria to protest the apartheid pass laws. It is possible **to explore other equally productive meanings** of rock art by rock hard people and, in this instance, the San communities of Southern Africa come to mind. The San, also known as "the First People", can be found principally in Angola, Namibia, Botswana and, of course, South Africa. Centuries ago, they mastered the art of making paintings and engravings on rock surfaces. These works of art were not merely decorative. They tell stories, communicate healing and enact rituals for communal wellness and cohesion. In spite of colonisation and various forms of oppression, these works of art have endured and this attests to the strength and resilience of the people who created them. Indeed San communities are littered across the Southern African region despite mounting challenges, and their survival represents a broader African narrative of durability and adaptability. Their story forms the essential backdrop to this article on women who struggle against all kinds of dispossession: political, cultural, economic and sexist among other types of oppression.

The work of two black South African photographers, Zanele Muholi and Ingrid Masondo, can be construed as efforts to debunk the misrepresentations of the black African woman by centuries-long colonial imagery, on the one hand, and — in spite of the constitutional recognition of gay rights — within the matrix of a largely homophobic, patriarchal, post-apartheid South Africa, on the other. Within colonial consciousness, the black female body was preposterously exoticised, anaestheticised, and hypersexualised. By being thrust into a vortex of unruly instincts, the black African female was grossly violated in more ways than one.

"Rebellion in and of itself becomes a thoroughly creative act... a rite of purification before renewed energies are unleashed for social reconstruction."

"San rock art tells stories, communicates healing, and enacts rituals for communal wellness — testaments to a people's strength and resilience."

Sarah Bartmann was an unfortunate indigene of what eventually became South Africa who was enslaved to be paraded in the freak shows of London and Paris during the nineteenth century on account of her well-endowed posterior (a contemporary equivalent would be the Brazilian Butt Lift - BBL). Bartmann was constantly dehumanised, abused and subsequently left for dead for no reason other than her natural physical attributes. Judging by her horrendous ordeal, it would appear that at the often perverse heart of Euro-modernity was an implacable impulse to enslave, violate, and finally exterminate.

In their work, Muholi and Masondo seek to subvert colonialism's visual enslavement and abuse. Even in postcolonial times, this visual misappropriation and denigration persist in a variety of ways, from the fashion industry's rigid and unwritten policies of control, manipulation and exploitation, to rabid sexual abuse and enslavement in several societies across the world. Muholi and Masondo, therefore, address the continuing traumatisation of the black female and her body by society writ large. Not only is her body controlled and policed in numerous ways, her images and identity are also subjected to the same means of subjugation and exploitation. The physical and emotional injuries form the basis on which Muholi in particular explores the various manifestations of victimhood. In a good number of her photographs, Muholi is able to wrest power away from her masculinist oppressor, thereby asserting her own strength, resilience, and individuality.

In March 2010, Muholi's work together with that of Nandipha Mntambo generated considerable controversy following an exhibition titled Innovative Women that was staged at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg in August 2009. Lulu Xingwana, the then Minister for Arts and Culture, described the photographs on exhibition as "pornographic" and orchestrated a walk-out while opposition politician Annelie Lotriet called the minister a homophobe. Muholi and Mntambo had sought to educate the South African

“At the heart of Euro-modernity was an implacable impulse to enslave, violate, and finally exterminate the black female body.”

public about what it meant to live as a lesbian in their country. Xingwana, on the other hand, had been offended by their work. Xingwana claimed that the photographs abolished the boundaries between art and pornography and a spokesperson in her ministry defended the minister’s stance in relation to the “pro-lesbian exhibition”. In offering her views, Xingwana argued that the photographs could not be said to advance the cause of “moral regeneration, social cohesion and nation-building”. Some critics simply labelled her remarks as “crude fascism”.

In order to reclaim a degree of authenticity, both photographers (especially Muholi) explore notions of female agency outside the traditional assumptions of heteronormative culture and, accordingly, terms pertaining to mothering, beauty, exposure, vulnerability, and strength acquire new meanings.

In other parts of Africa, this recuperation of female agency is undoubtedly more difficult. When Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* was to be staged in Uganda in 2005, the goons of patriarchy promptly swung into action. The then Minister for Information and Broadcasting, James Nsaba Buturo, claimed the play could not be staged in Kampala because the morals of society would be undermined. The Ugandan Medical Council offered its support, stating that the play promoted lesbianism and homosexuality. Arguably, this impeded the drive for women’s empowerment in a country ravaged by war in the north where underage girls were forced into domestic and sex slavery and were routinely raped. Rather than conceal this deplorable state of affairs, Ensler’s play would have provided a fresh way of viewing skewed gender relations.

The play itself has female emancipation as its main subject matter. It discloses what society would rather not confront about the female. In the play, two women hold imaginary mirrors to their genitals and discuss the location of the g-spot, the enticing and fleshy layers of the labia, the sensitivities of the nerves of the vagina, the ineffable pleasures obtained from sex with both men and women, the traumas of rape, and the hidden verities of female sexual pleasure. Their frank exchange touches upon the core that patriarchy strives to protect and conceal. Instead of admitting its inexplicable fear of the vagina, the patriarchy has created elaborate institutions and practices of control to disguise what it would rather not confront.

The aborted attempt to stage the *Vagina Monologues* in Kampala is one of countless incidents attesting to the fear of the vagina and the need for strict social control. Not only was the fear of female genitalia demonstrated by the organs and agencies of patriarchy, there was also an explicit disapproval of same-sex affairs. In Ensler’s play on the dilemmas of female agency, the Ugandan state apparatus saw the possibility for an unacceptable emergence of gay rights politics. In this regard, it was at least correct in assuming that feminist politics leads to the reorganisation of both public and private spaces. Under feminist politics, the borders of both the body and sexuality are irrevocably transformed.

“The play confronted what patriarchy strives to conceal — its fear of the vagina and the institutions it creates to control it.”

It is easy to be seduced by South Africa’s Tracey Rose’s preference for revolt which often trumps the demand for sufficient critique. Rose once attempted to defecate in full public view of her MA class at Goldsmith College, London, during a performance of “Shittin’ Bullion” and understandably received a dismissive reaction. Rose, it was claimed, “despised the UK”. There is a long history of anti-art movements and forms of conceptual art that embody both formal and informal aspects of revolt and creative experimentation. John Lennon’s widow, Yoko Ono, produced cool and ironic anti-art statements that startled art audiences in the 1960s.

Rose, in a famous creative performance, urinated on the wall that divided Israel and Palestine to generate mixed feelings that prompted political awareness, consternation and revulsion. Such rebellious performance art elicits strong reactions to her stance and her views. Traditionally, Rose is interested in issues of race, gender, and sexuality as she has demonstrated over the course of three decades of making art professionally.

There is, arguably, at least at face value, a curious mix of fierceness and whimsicality in Rose's creative explorations. There is also a sense of outrage that unsettles the strictures constructed by the external eye. The female body, and more precisely, the black female body, delimited by age-long colonial injunction, is meant to be ravished and devoured without caution or restraint. Exoticisation, otherisation, rape and plunder have been the predetermined destiny of the ideologically captive black body, both male and female.

For centuries, black women have been disenfranchised by both colonial dynamics and patriarchy. But Rose's art seems to offer a fervent resistance to this kind of historic violence, one that invariably denudes the female spirit of vitality and individuality. Her art is not about seeking political accommodation and justification. On the contrary, it is a distinctive search for personal and social uplift regardless of the odds.

"Rose's art hollers unabashedly about her intention to be free and to transgress the boundaries society imposes on black women."

It is necessary to consider the reality of the invisible South African coloured (in South Africa, this means mixed race) woman. Perhaps the issue is rather more complex than that of mere public recognition. It is probably more about exploitation and manipulation. A subjugated female obviously poses no threat to a predominantly sexist status quo. Rose unequivocally resists the tyranny of patriarchy. But she does it with a fierceness and an unwavering single-mindedness. There can be no half measures here and her art hollers unabashedly about her intention to be free and to transgress the boundaries society invariably imposes on black women.

And so Rose would have us believe she may be just our most insufferable gadfly. She is somewhat akin to a feral creature that promptly destroys our carefully fabricated - albeit often artificial - social arrangements - unlimited, uncontrollable and perhaps even slightly unhinged. In total, she could very well be your worst possible migraine.

The three major artists - Muholi, Masondo and Rose - discussed here are ultimately concerned with the politics of the private; indeed ostensibly larger civil liberties are1111 related to what we do in the secrecy of our bedrooms and how this shapes social behaviour and our capacity to resist bigotry, venial myopia and hypocrisy. As such, what is done in the privacy of the bedroom determines not only our future but also the state of public health, civil liberties, and collective evolution. In this manner, the distinction between the private and the public becomes blurred or even abolished. And this is why an artist such as Muholi bares her innermost secrets for others like her to find validation and personal redemption.

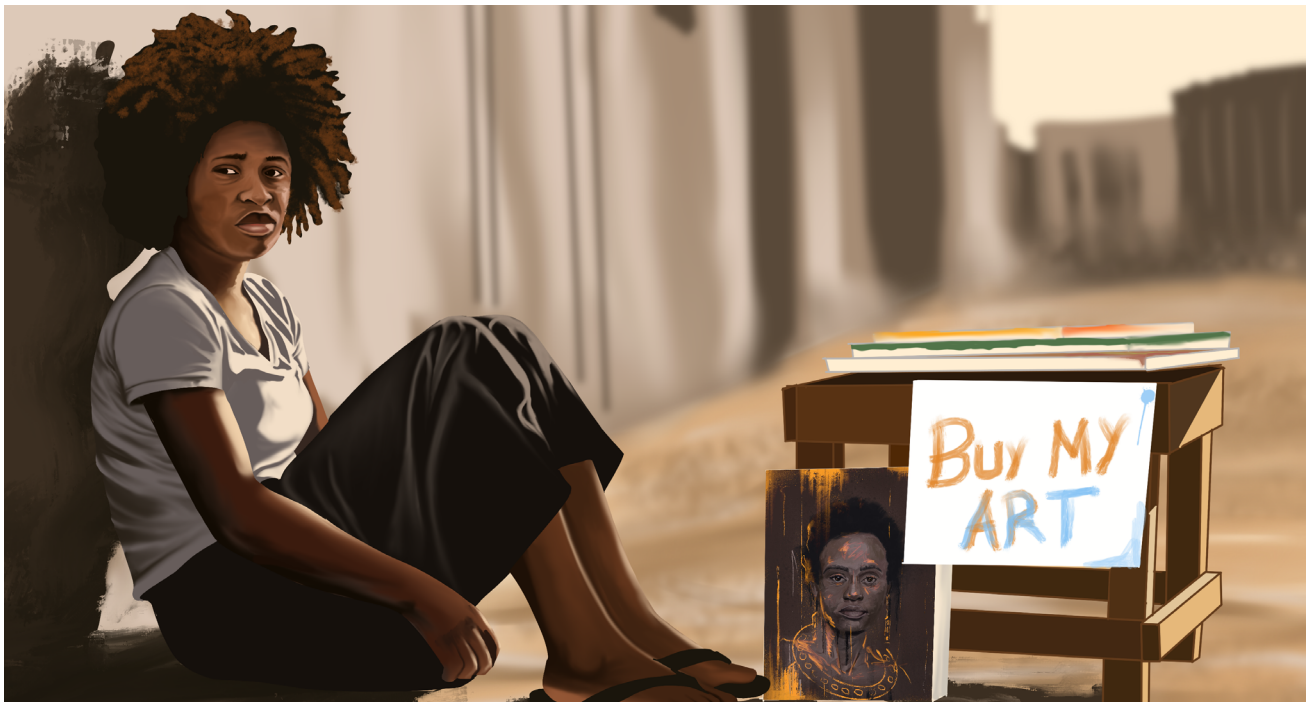
Sanya Osha is a fellow of the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies (STIAS), South Africa.

Sudan

Class, Creativity, and Cultural Production in Africa

By Reem Aljeally

Artistic freedom and expression has long been shaped and constrained by many factors including power, economic hierarchies, and class. In Africa, the right to create and distribute art without censorship has always been a contested terrain.



Artists' realities in the African region are directly influenced by both their geographical and societal positions; class plays a big role in how the art world runs. What does society consider as art? Who gets to buy, collect, or even witness art? Who has access to exhibition spaces or international residencies? These questions are not abstract; they define the careers of many artists, including my own.

Since 2011, we have seen youth-led movements harness creativity as a tool for political resistance, from the Arab Spring uprisings to #FeesMustFall in South Africa, #EndSARS in Nigeria, and, most recently, Kenya's Gen Z protests. In Sudan, where I was born and raised, the December Revolution was marked not only by chants in the streets but also by murals, poems, songs, and performances that transformed the cityscape into a living archive of resistance. Yet, even within such moments of collective creativity, class distinctions determined who could participate, whose voices were amplified, and whose remained unheard.

In this article, I reflect on how class shapes artistic and cultural production in Africa: how it has defined access to creativity, how it limits cultural consumption, and what mechanisms - grassroots, digital, and transnational - have begun to narrow these divides. My reflections are grounded in personal experience as an artist and curator working between Khartoum and Cairo, as the founder of The Muse multi-studios and the Sudan Art Archive, and as a participant in regional and international networks of cultural production.

Social hierarchy and access to creativity

In Khartoum, where I first studied architecture before turning to painting and curation, access to art education was already limited to two art schools at the Sudan University for Science and Technology and the newly founded Art programme at the Al-Nileen University. Access to these institutions was competitive, and while not restricted in principle, in practice it was shaped by social status and community expectations. Families in Sudan often encouraged more "practical" fields like engineering, medicine, or architecture - disciplines seen as more secure.

Many young Sudanese who aspired to become artists may have had their educational **background** shaped by these community views, yet it has not stopped them from pursuing a career in the field upon completing their studies. Those who came from upper class families had a better chance of accessing educational institutions abroad while the majority were funnelled into informal workshops or self-taught practices because institutions were either non-existent or insufficiently resourced.

German curator and researcher Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann observes that the development of art education in Sudan has been deeply influenced by colonial legacies. Institutions such as the College of Fine and Applied Arts in Khartoum (originally established under British colonial rule) implemented curricula modelled on Western art academies. These frameworks introduced formalist, Eurocentric paradigms that continue to shape artistic discourse, pedagogy, and aesthetic hierarchies in the postcolonial context.

Access to these institutions, and to international art education more broadly, has historically been mediated by class intersecting with gender and racial categories. During both the late colonial and early post-independence periods, educational and cultural policies enabled a small elite (predominantly from Khartoum's middle- and upper-class families) to study abroad. Upon their return, these artists occupied influential positions in Sudan's cultural institutions and helped define national artistic narratives. As Fuhrmann notes, the stratification becomes evident when examining how some of these artists categorize work produced outside formal institutions or urban centres as "folkloric", thereby reinforcing **classed** and spatial distinctions in cultural valuation.

This dynamic illustrates the broader relationship between class, cultural capital, and aesthetic authority. Artists with international training and transnational visibility have historically been more likely to receive institutional recognition and access to resources such as galleries, collectors, and critical discourse. By contrast, locally trained artists without such networks often remain marginalized. As Fuhrmann suggests, this pattern is not unique to Sudan but reflects global inequalities in the circulation and validation of artistic production.

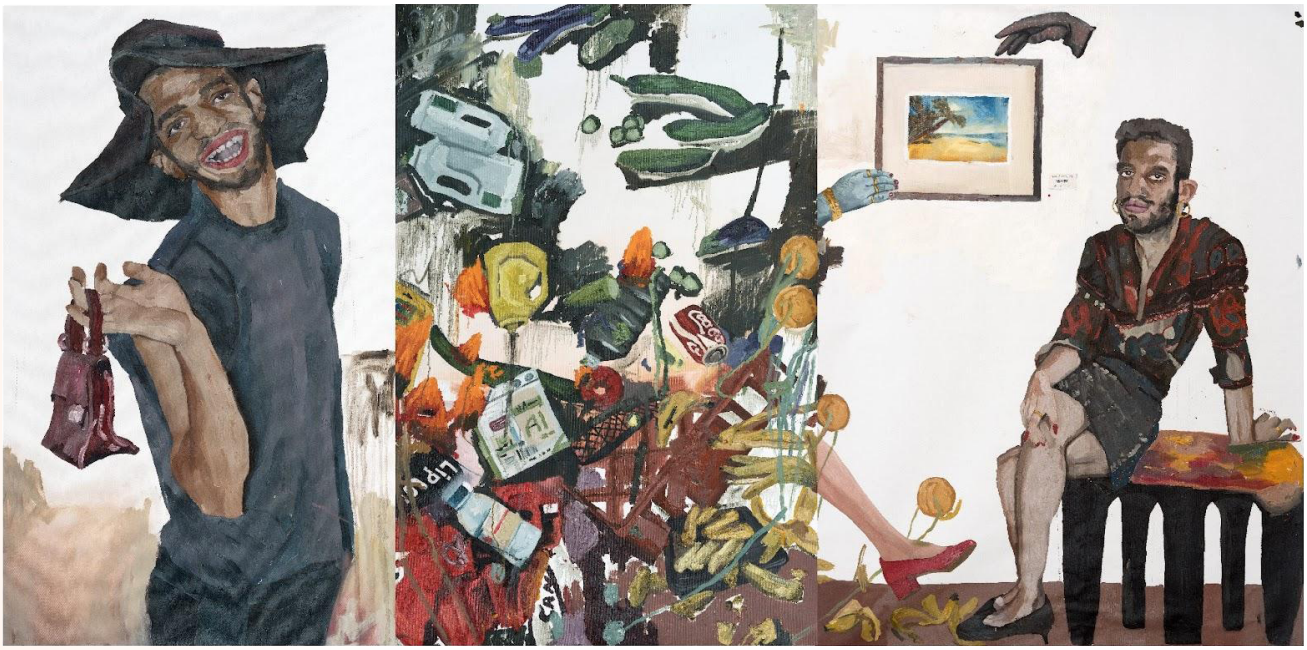
The relationship between social class and education is critical here. Education may open doors, but class determines whether those doors can truly be walked through. In Khartoum, access to art schools was less of an issue than what came after: exhibition spaces, residencies, opportunities to travel, and access to international networks. These post-education opportunities were overwhelmingly skewed toward those with means - financial, linguistic, or social. Khartoum's art scene has been dominated by foreign institutions and their cultural centres, the activities of embassies and supported programmes that have shaped narratives around certain artists and their work. A young artist with fluent English, for instance, could navigate these circles and be able to manage applications for grants or residencies abroad, while others were excluded by language barriers before their talent was even considered.

Class and collecting art

If class determines who creates art, it also shapes who consumes it. In Khartoum, the culture of collecting is limited, and where it exists, it is often restricted to a narrow elite or international buyers; exhibitions are often attended by the same small circle of artists, academics, and diplomats. Public engagement with art was limited, not because of lack of interest but because of structural barriers: galleries were concentrated in certain neighbourhoods, often inaccessible to working-class communities.

In Cairo, a more developed art market exists, but even there, collecting tends to be restricted to a certain kind of social status and even to certain artists in some cases - those already exhibiting internationally, or those whose work aligns with global trends and higher-ranked individuals or institutions. This means that while art education might be accessible, sustaining a career as an artist is still determined by class, by whether one can find patrons, collectors, or institutions willing to invest.

Class determines not only who creates art, but who gets to witness it, collect it, and sustain a career within it."



Omar Gabr, Funny Effect 1 - Oil on Canvas, 182 x 342 cm, 2019-2020

In his work "Funny Effects 1", young Egyptian artist Omar Gabr addresses this class-controlled environment of art collecting in Cairo. Having entered the art scene at just 19, he uses sarcasm to depict the unease of navigating collectors and audiences from upper-class circles, subtly exposing the divide between young creators and elite consumers.

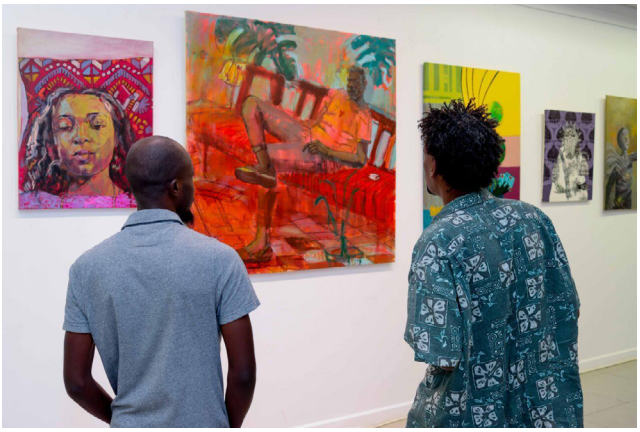
Despite these elite-driven strictures, informal cultural practices continue to thrive across African cities, offering alternative spaces for creativity that resist class-based gatekeeping. During Sudan's revolution, walls became canvases, songs were shared freely, and poetry circulated on the streets. These practices challenged the monopoly of elite cultural production, demonstrating how art can thrive in public spaces even without institutional support. Yet they were also vulnerable to erasure: murals were painted over by authorities, performers were harassed, and documentation was often absent. This precarity underscores how fragile artistic freedom remains when it relies solely on informal networks.

Young Kenyan independent curator Thaddeus Wamukoya (Tewa) reflects a shared experience of how status, money, power, and political positions affect the art market. When Tewa is asked why he usually hosts his exhibitions at The Village Market, one of Nairobi's high-end malls, he says it gives him easier access to potential clients and collectors, adding that, unfortunate as it is, we have to acknowledge that status and class determine how art is circulated. Referrals and word of mouth are also of high value in Kenya's market: "The culture of having someone refer you can guarantee easy work. People often consume average things - and art - because they saw someone else do it," says Tewa.

> **"Even within moments of collective creativity, class distinctions determined whose voices were amplified and whose remained unheard."**

It is important to note that class rarely operates in isolation; it intersects with gender and race in ways that reshape cultural hierarchies. The latter further complicates Kenya's scene: a market dominated by white gallery owners privileges buyers and tourists, who often access information about artists and their artworks more easily than local Black Kenyans. The "white cube" model is a foreign concept to Africa, introduced by the West and structured to gatekeep, introducing classism to the market, leaving local models of studios, collectives, and initiatives to struggle in a system that does not serve them. Across the continent, similar dynamics play out with local variations.

In many African countries, Western women with backgrounds in the aid industry channel their capital into the art market. Their influence extends beyond gallery ownership to social networks, including exclusive networks



A Contemporary Art Affair: Emerging African Voices Exhibition, TewasArtGallery, 2025

and events. Here, class and race become the driving forces of access and authority, even in a space where gender, in another context, might have limited such visibility. This stands in contrast with Sudan where, historically, male artists from Khartoum's upper and middle classes have held privileged access to recognition and resources, while voices from marginalized regions, such as the Nuba Mountains or Darfur, have been systematically excluded. The picture is therefore uneven: in one context, class intersects with race to privilege white women, while in another, class intersects with gender to privilege men. Both reveal how deeply entrenched systems of power shape who becomes visible in the art world.

New models, new ages

Despite these challenges, mechanisms have emerged to counter the impact of class on cultural production. Tewa's model of operating has been heavily reliant on the Internet and Instagram as a platform that has been transformative. Social media allows artists to bypass traditional gatekeepers, share work directly with audiences, and build transnational communities. It has enabled artists who lack institutional support or access to collectors to create visibility, mobilize solidarity, and even sell works directly. In contexts where state repression or elite capture of the art market is strong, these digital tools have opened spaces for alternative forms of recognition.

> **“Digital and grassroots models do not erase inequality, but they redistribute visibility, shifting the power of who speaks and who is heard.”**

At the same time, the digital sphere reproduces its own hierarchies. Algorithms reward certain aesthetics that align with global trends, while artists without access to high-quality documentation or steady internet remain at a disadvantage. Visibility can be purchased through sponsored posts, and those with greater resources - better studios, professional photography, fluent English captions - still hold an edge. The very same platforms that dismantle some barriers end up constructing new ones.

Alongside social media, we see the rise of collectives, pop-up exhibitions, and community-driven archives that challenge the dominance of the white cube. In Sudan and Egypt, grassroots initiatives have reimagined cultural infrastructure through shared studios, neighbourhood art projects, and self-organized residencies. These models rely on networks of trust and reciprocity rather than on class-based patronage. They also produce new forms of value: visibility in the public space, belonging in community, and solidarity across borders. What these examples suggest is not the disappearance of class, but a reconfiguration of how it operates. Digital and grassroots models do not erase inequality, but they redistribute visibility, shifting the power of who speaks and who is heard. They carve out spaces where young, marginalized, or self-taught artists can assert their presence without waiting for institutional approval.

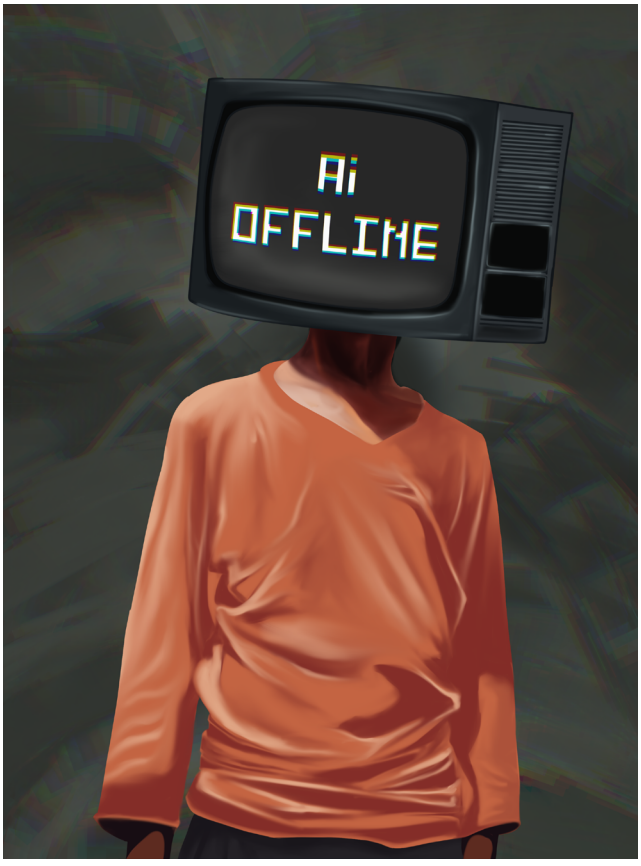
Class remains one of the most enduring obstacles to artistic freedom in Africa. It shapes who becomes an artist, who sustains a career, and who consumes culture. It also influences whose stories enter the record and whose remain untold. Yet class is not an insurmountable barrier; it is a terrain of struggle, negotiation, and reimagination. The future of creativity in Africa depends on inclusivity, on breaking down class divides to empower diverse voices. When artists from all backgrounds can create, share, and sustain their work - whether through digital platforms, collectives, or reimagined public spaces - cultural production becomes not just an elite pursuit but a collective force for transformation. Only then will artistic freedom truly embody its promise as a cornerstone of democracy and human rights.

Kenya

Art & AI: The End of Creativity or A New Era of Artistic Expression?

A Q&A with Chief Nyamweya

The conversation around Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the creative industries is often filled with hype and speculation. Is it a tool for liberation or a threat to livelihoods? Chief Nyamweya, co-founder of the Kenyan animation studio Pungulu Pa Productions, cuts through the noise by sharing his on-the-ground experience developing the African children's series *Uli and Tata*. He explores the practical realities, ethical dilemmas, and unique opportunities AI presents for artists, particularly those from the Global South.



Q As a creator, what has been your view of the interaction between art and state structures?

A. Our team was stopped at a police checkpoint during a research trip. The tension was high as we unpacked our gear. As an officer questioned me, I showed him my sketchbooks filled with dozens of drawings of camels that I had made during our trip. His demeanour changed completely and we ended up laughing together, in awe at the camel's unique gait. Our driver was confused by the transformation. As we left, I told the officer to look for us on YouTube; my phone battery was dead, but thankfully, sketchbooks don't need charging.

Q As an animator creating content for African children, what was your initial, practical view of AI tools?

A: My approach was to see AI as a potential tool, not a magical solution. At our studio, Pungulu Pa, our mission is to create content that inspires African kids to love their land and culture – a direct response to the lack of quality, culturally relevant animation. We started with intensive, on-the-ground research, like travelling to Kakamega Forest to listen to stories and observe wildlife. So, when engaging with AI platforms like DALL-E or Midjourney, I evaluated them based on a simple question: are they a solution in search of a problem, or a genuine companion for a creative like me? The answer, I found, is complicated.

Q Animation is a complex process. Where does AI fit into the "production pipeline"?

A: Animation isn't just a software function; it's a multi-stage "production pipeline" involving fundraising, research, screenwriting, storyboarding, voice acting, animation, and more. For our series *Uli and Tata*, primary research alone consumes 15 to 20 per cent of our budget because we are committed to archiving and accurately representing African cultures, avoiding the stereotypes you might find with a simple Google search.

In this context, AI's potential is twofold. On one hand, giant Hollywood studios may use the "AI scare" to lay off workers. On the other hand, for a young industry like Kenya's, where most studios are small and survive on corporate client gigs, AI tools could be a lever to close the gap with bigger players. As my friend and Art Director Shaddie has demonstrated, by building AI agents that mirror our pipeline, we have every incentive to grab any tool that might help. After all, how can you be disrupted when you're not even at the feeding table yet?

Q So, you experimented with AI. What was your hands-on experience like?

A: I decided to train as an AI storyboard agent. Storyboards are rough drawings that plan out an animation and are a major bottleneck in any pipeline. I thought it would be a perfect test because image quality isn't the priority. However, I quickly hit a wall. I was spending more time training the AI – translating my thoughts into perfect text prompts – than if I had simply picked up a pencil and drawn the storyboards myself. This led me to a fundamental question: isn't the whole point of freehand drawing to witness the unmediated mind of a human being?

Q Beyond practical hurdles, what are the ethical concerns for artists?

A: The ethical issues are profound. First, there's the issue of theft. AI companies are facing lawsuits because their models are trained on the work of artists without permission or compensation. The argument that "we are building the future" is vacuous. As technologist Dr Dwayne Munroe cautions, we risk projecting creativity onto what is essentially sophisticated statistical mimicry.

Furthermore, the "hidden costs" are alarming. The tech industry's extractive logic treats artists as invisible, uncompensated data suppliers. Worse, we've learned that underpaid Kenyan workers are exposed to violent and traumatic content to "clean" AI training data for Western users. There's also a deep cultural bias: these datasets overwhelmingly reflect Western aesthetics, threatening to further marginalise African traditions that are not widely digitised.

Q Given these problems, is there a positive path for AI in Africa?

A: Absolutely, but it requires a foundational first step: the digitization of African languages and ethically sourced knowledge. Imagine if institutions like the National Museums of Kenya created a public digital archive of traditional songs. This would not only preserve our culture but also subsidise the research for projects like ours.

Only after this can we embark on genuinely exciting experiments, like training a Large Language Model to speak the now-extinct El Molo language. However, we must be realistic. We cannot expect profit-driven Silicon Valley corporations to make these investments. In a capitalist system, an "AI-girlfriend" app will always be deemed more profitable than an El Molo language app for users without credit cards.

Q What is the single biggest challenge facing Kenyan animators – is it really AI?

A: Not even close. The challenges highest on our list are access to capital and a conducive policy framework, like tax incentives. Skills training is a distant third. We have a situation of "over-capacitated" but unemployed animators because, after a decade of donor-funded training, there are still too few studios and projects to employ them. Skills are useless without the infrastructure – the "hospitals" – for them to practise in.

Q In conclusion, how should we view this moment? Is AI the end of creativity or a new frontier?

A: It can be a new frontier, but only if we confront the system in which it operates. Training a machine to draw like us is an impressive achievement, but how much greater would it be if it wasn't underwritten by theft and ecological destruction?

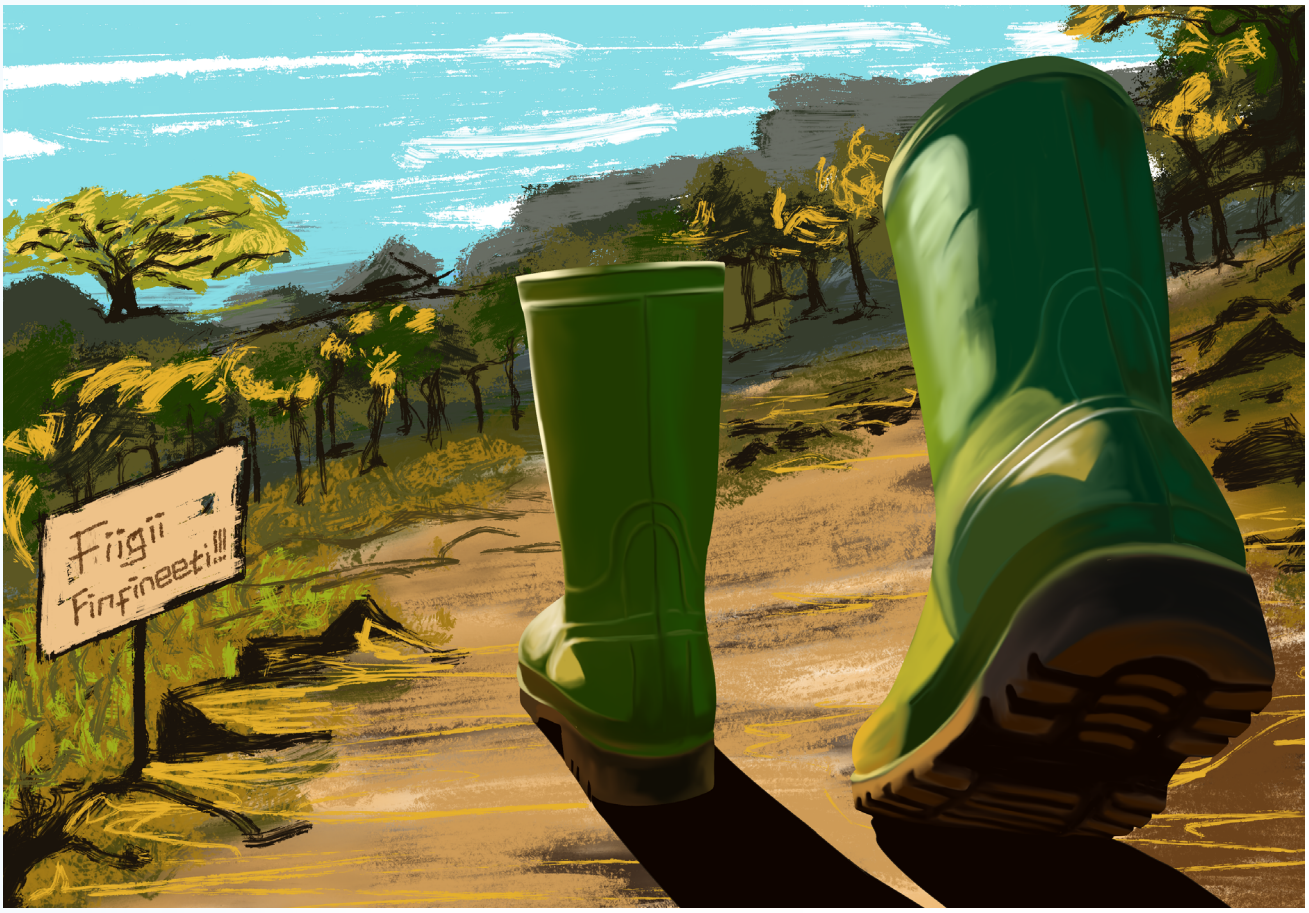
Our ultimate goal in Kenya shouldn't just be to adopt new tools, but to upgrade our understanding of culture as defined in our constitution – as the foundation of our nation. This means breaking the silos between heritage, the arts, and technology, and ending the subordination of our culture to tourism. We must seize the means of telling our own stories. We can disrupt the production pipeline all we want, but if we don't disrupt the cold, capitalist logic of distribution and profit, we're merely rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. We are not mere spectators to history. We, too, have our story to tell.

Ethiopia

Finfinnee is the third space

By Soreti Kadir

At the end of 2010, I took a trip to Ethiopia to visit my family. At the time, my parents worked in Bole, the commercial centre of Addis Ababa. Being only 16, my movements were more or less regulated by my parents, which meant that I would travel with them into the city each day, after which it was the extent of my curiosity and creativity (and pocket money) that determined what I did until evening, when I would head back to our house on the outskirts of the city. Slowly, interactions with the staff at a nearby cafe, just a few hundred meters from the building where my family worked, became routine



Over the two months that I was in Ethiopia, with much of this time spent in Addis Ababa, we spent most of our lunch breaks together, hanging out on the steps of the cafe, sharing stories to pass the time. One day, the conversation of our relationship to 'Ethiopia', as a national identity, came up. It's important to note that I was raised in the Oromo diaspora, a community that, in the years my mother and I migrated to Australia, was made up mostly of political refugees who fled the country after the adoption of the "Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia" and the official establishment of a transitional government.

This eventually led to the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) monopolizing power within the Ethiopian People's

Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a process that resulted in the isolation of those seeking political power within the EPRDF through the ballot. Given the size and economic importance of the Oromia region, it was the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), amongst others, that became a key target of political violence, creating political communities in exile exactly like the one that I grew up in.

I inherited a different definition of Ethiopia, coloured by memories and experiences of violence and displacement that informed my relationship to the state as a place of unbelonging for those who shared my identity. The day that the conversation with these two new friends wandered into political territory, we all engaged passionately, striving to reflect the extent of both our personal experiences and hopes for our country. They found my reflections to be overly nostalgic and antagonistic towards the country's future. unconcerned for the good of the future. I found their insistence that we shared a national identity to be inaccurate and offensive. We agreed on little, and I found it exhilarating.

That evening, I was restlessly anticipating the opportunity to tell my mother about what I thought was the most exciting experience of my trip to date. In recounting the story, I almost gave my mother a heart attack. Angry, afraid, and in shock, my mother warned me sternly against ever engaging in such conversation in public again. She asked me many questions about who these men were, how I knew them, and if we'd ever had such conversations before. What I was blind to, and what was the daily lived experience of my parents, was that Addis Ababa, primarily but not exclusively, was a heavily surveilled city, the State looking for the people doing exactly what I found myself doing that day - discussing the political reality of our country. Thereafter, I was careful, out of curiosity more than fear (being 16 with a high risk tolerance will do that), refraining from fully-fledged conversations and opting for quiet enquiry when the opportunity presented itself. Although our conversation never veered down the road of politics again, I continued to visit my friends every day and remember rushing to say a heartfelt goodbye on the day I was due to fly back to Australia.

For this piece, I will centre the discussion on Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, as opposed to extending the conversation to other parts of the country which exist with their own nuances and political realities, requiring more space for analysis than I have here. I share the introductory anecdote to forward the idea that, in Ethiopia, to nurture spaces of connection, community-building, and care, we must first invest in collective repair of the damage wrought by decades of state surveillance that has defined the range and breadth of relational life the city space can hold, and from the legacy of what can only be defined as settler colonialism. 'Where', figuratively and literally, can this process of repair take place? I argue that it must take place in Finfinnee, geographically the same location as Addis Ababa, but sociologically and historically, different, and with a capacity unique unto itself to ground and lead us to new political possibilities.

> **"To nurture spaces of connection and care, we must first repair the damage wrought by decades of state surveillance."**

In 1886, Menelik II conquered the lands that were then known as Finfinnee and were primarily inhabited by the Tulama Oromo. As it took on its new identity as the "new flower" (the meaning of Addis Ababa), as both a military barrack for the expansion of Menelik's empire, and as the accumulation point for capital extracted throughout the process of the Ethiopian state's consolidation, Finfinnee lost something, an essence. Regaining connection with it, not just for the Oromo, but for all who inhabit the Ethiopian state, is vital if we are to become free of cyclical violence, political domination and mass poverty. Fundamentally, this perspective is concerned with the functions that Finfinnee held space for, which were specific to the Oromo's indigenous ways of organising society and were destroyed to make room for the functions of the modern nation-state's capital city. Historically, Finfinnee was the convergence point for the five Gadaa assemblies, representing the centre of the loose confederation of diverse Oromo clan groups. This site of togetherness was activated not only for lengthy discussion and dialogue, unrestrained by time and space, taking months if needed and housed only by the branches of the sycamore tree (known as the *Odaa*) that the meetings would take place under but, moreover, Finfinnee also provided a place for collective connection with the natural world and the Creator.

Every year, the Oromo would converge in the millions to express gratitude for the change of seasons, for livelihood, and for collective life. This celebration, *Irreechaa*, was banned under EPRDF rule, and although it was brought back by the current ruling party, what we now have is a pacified, desecrated, and heavily militarized version of the rite. This is because it was brought back to *Addis Ababa*, not to *Finfinnee*. If the return of *Irreechaa* had been to Finfinnee,

rather than being performed as a plasticized event that seems to exacerbate ethnic animosities each year, it would serve as the site of dialogue and togetherness that it is meant to be.

In Finfinnee, the idea of a neighbour going without while your home is full is difficult to embrace. In Addis Ababa, your conditions and survival depend on whether or not you can successfully sell your labour. In Finfinnee, the idea of war as a solution, before all means of peaceful reconciliation are tried, even if these discussions take many months, would be an affront to what it means to inhabit the land. In Addis Ababa, war is a means to consolidate power and make those in the business of war richer. Finfinnee is governed by an entirely different set of ideals from those of Addis Ababa, and this suggestion that we find our way back to these ideals is neither archaic idealisation nor is it the fruit of exclusionary nationalism with which many associate any discussion of Finfinnee vs Addis Ababa. Rather, for the city to make way for healthy public life to emerge, it has to lose grip with its identity as a centre of surveillance and as a place that offers itself as dignifiably livable for only the political and economic elite.

> **Regaining connection with Finfinnee is vital if we are to become free of cyclical violence, political domination, and mass poverty."**

The song *Abba Bootii*, meaning "Father of the gumboots", by Jaalee Amantee, uses both lyrics and the music video to make intriguing and poignant commentary on the social and economic reality of this question of Addis Ababa vs Finfinnee. The gumboots, worn traditionally by male farmers and usually accompanied by a dress shirt, pants, jackets, a woollen vest, a baseball cap, and a traditional white cotton blanket draped across the top half of the body, are an aesthetic commonly associated with farming communities on the outskirts of Finfinnee, the traditional lands of the Tulama Oromo. In the chorus of the song, the artist says, "*Sii ga'eera tufiin biyyaa kan keetii*," "You've had enough of the disdain that your country shows you," and then goes on to say, "*Fiigii Finfineeti*," meaning, "Onward to Finfinnee." In the music video, we see a man intended to represent the Oromo who have embraced the aesthetics of modernity, stepping out of a car, dressed in semi-casual clothes. He sees mannequins dressed in the *Abba Bootii* aesthetic and proceeds to go and take selfies with them. As the chorus begins, the mannequins come to life and use their *shimala* to chase the man through the city, where he tries to escape by hiding behind different people, each of these people transforming into **who all reflect to him** the *Abba Bootii*, played by Jaalee himself. Eventually, the man ends up on land being ploughed by a man (also Jaalee) with an ox, where he faces off with the mannequins, the cityscape visible in the background. A *shimala* is a long stick that is commonly associated with both farming and self-defence practices among the Tulama Oromo. The act of taking a selfie with the mannequins, who are also wearing black masks to further symbolise erasure, and the ensuing confrontation, we can interpret as Jaalee's attempt to return agency to the wearer of the gumboots in an Addis Ababa social and political environment where the way of life of those who work the land is subject to objectification and erasure.

Although this song is specific to the story of the northern Oromo farmers' relationship to Addis Ababa and their relationship to the "modern" Oromo, we can apply the message of the song to help us further the analysis we make here. Acceptance and inclusion within the realm of Addis Ababa is conditional upon one's ability to perform modernity, and this is not just limited to what one wears, but it also includes what one thinks about the state project. What this song implies is that the aesthetic one chooses to adorn in Addis Ababa indicates to the surveillance systems how close or how far they may be from complying with the logics of capital and the state. It is not only the Oromo that would be subjected to this assessment in Addis Ababa; rather, any person representative of the majority subsistence farming class of Ethiopia would be eyed with caution in Addis Ababa, for their rejection of Addis Ababa would be a threat that, if it grew, could collapse the state entirely.

If Addis Ababa must fence itself off from the historic and contemporary realities that created and sustain it to safeguard its survival, then it must remain perpetually alert to any signs of the return to Finfinnee, which is as much a place as it is a political reality and mindset. Finfinnee is the site within Ethiopia where a multi-national class revolution becomes a possibility. It provides the depth of recalibration needed for us to re-enter the communion of person-to-person dialogue, to extend mutual care and solidarity, and to remember a relationship to land that goes beyond extraction. Finfinnee is the third space.

Kenya

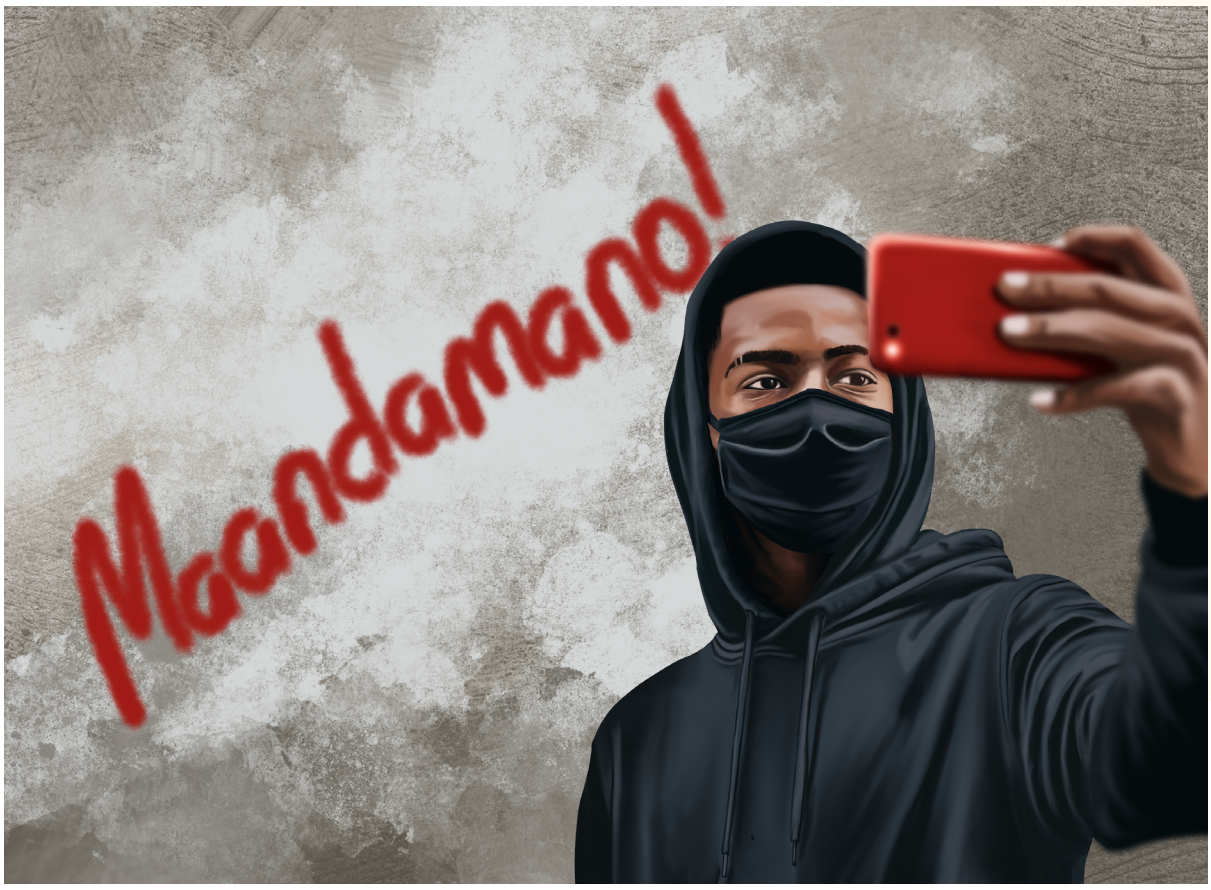
Art is Maandamano

By Darius Okolla

In the weeks leading up to the storming of the Kenyan parliament in June 2024, I noticed a unique element in the type of people who attended the protests; they polled much younger, more enthusiastic, and some wore fairly pricey clothing. Not exactly what we have come to expect of Kenya's rank-and-file rioters.

The quest for justice expressed through protest had found resonance with the type of Kenyan who would often be considered apolitical and indifferent to politics. They are not the group most invested in the mechanics of dealing with teargas, running battles, and placards. Something had changed, we just didn't fully appreciate it yet. Somehow this apathetic regime had finally managed to enrage a unique, previously indifferent cluster: the middle-class Gen Zs.

In the heated political climate of mid-2024, Kenya witnessed an unprecedented wave of protests led largely by its Generation Z. While the immediate trigger was the controversial Finance Bill, the movement was distinguished not just by its scale but by its form. This was a revolution articulated through art, creativity, and a masterful use of the public space, demonstrating a profound and sophisticated handling of artistic freedom as a tool for resistance, mobilization, and memory. Music, visual art, and digital creativity have become the lifeblood of the movement, giving voice to the voiceless and fuelling calls for change.



This was a revolution articulated through art, creativity, and a masterful use of public space."

Art meets maandamano

For Kenyan Gen Zs, the expression of artistic freedom became the primary language of dissent. The typical protest, characterized by marches and chants, was subsumed into a broader, more creative spectacle. The streets of Nairobi transformed into a dynamic, open-air gallery. Visual art and the national flag were reclaimed as symbols of resistance, becoming trendy and powerful identifiers for a disillusioned youth.

Placards and banners carried in the 35 of the 48 counties that experienced protests were not mere cardboard and paint; they were vessels of sharp, poetic copywriting that defined the identity of the grievances against the regime. These creations provided clarity in the face of obfuscating political rhetoric, energizing the masses and forging a visual alliance both on the ground and online.

This artistic fluency did not emerge in a vacuum. It was cultivated in the weekend street photography and videography sessions that had revitalized Nairobi's central business district over the preceding years leading up to 2024.

Initially facing pushback from the state and vulnerable to crime, these weekend artistic gatherings on Uhuru Highway and Kenyatta Avenue in the heart of the city were later endorsed by the Nairobi County government. This provided a crucial, non-political arena where Gen Zs developed a deep, tactical familiarity with the city streets.

For Kenyan Gen Zs, artistic freedom became the primary language of dissent."

When the protests erupted, this cohort did not see an alien urban landscape; they saw a territory they already owned spatially and creatively. The outcome of these continuous artistic activities by Gen Zs became undeniably visible as the same streets became the stage for a powerful subculture of protest art.

The ground zero of the state's **reaction** to artistic freedom was the abduction of George Kibet aka Kibet Bull. Kibet was abducted by suspected security officials on 24 December 2024, shortly after meeting Busia Senator Okiya Omtatah at the latter's office in Nairobi. The digital cartoonist Gideon Kibet, known for his viral caricatured silhouettes of President William Ruto, was released on January 6th after international outcry about the Kenya government reaction to the pro-governance protests.

Music served as the movement's heartbeat. Understanding that a revolution must be musical to sustain energy and unity, protesters curated and created songs that crystallized their ideas. The phenomenon went beyond spontaneous chanting. On streaming platforms like Spotify, users created public "*Maandamano*" playlists, turning individual expression into a collective, curated audio-visual activism. This protest music was highly derivative and communal—a form of common intellectual property borrowed from gospel, traditional tunes, sports chants, and pop music. Songs like Gidi Gidi Maji Maji's *Unbwoggable* from a previous political era were resurrected, while new chants like Yote *Yawezekana Bila*... targeted contemporary figures. This demonstrated a generational understanding of the power of music to convey emotions and uncomfortable truths that mere words could not.

Protest literature

Beyond the physical confrontation, the sheer poetry and strong imagery associated with the protests were a sight to behold. The typical concept of protests, mainly exercised through street demonstrations and actions, had given way to a broader embrace of other subversive forms of opposition; the arts.

Perhaps the most intellectually nuanced deployment of artistic freedom was in protest literature. Gen Zs weaponized their high school curriculum, pulling characters and themes from set books to articulate this contemporary struggle.

They deployed scenes from Francis Imbuga's play Betrayal in the City and used characters from Timothy Arege's *Mstahiki Meya* to convey messages about corruption and governance.

The sarcastic wit of *Tumbo Lisiloshiba* and the power dynamics in Pauline Keya's *Kigogo* found new life on X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok. This transformed abstract academic works into tangible, relatable stories, proving that the revolutionary spirit was, in part, inspired by the literary canons Gen Zs had studied.

> **Gen Zs weaponized their high-school curriculum to articulate this contemporary struggle."**

Art goes Digital

Finally, artistic freedom extended into the digital realm to build solidarity and archive memory. In a staggering show of online comradeship, millions of Kenyans applied a filter of slain citizens to their profile pictures on X. This act, reminiscent of a similar tactic used to protest femicide earlier in the year, created a symmetrical relation of visibility among dissenters. It was a digital demonstration of shared empathy and social capital, endowing the movement with a powerful, unified online identity.

Kenyan Gen Zs handled artistic freedom not as a passive right but as an active, multifaceted strategy. They synthesized visual art, music, literature, and digital innovation to fuel a resistance movement that was as culturally rich as it was politically potent. They proved that in the face of repression, art is not a sidebar to protest; it is the very medium through which a generation claims its voice, forges its identity, and writes its history.

The Gen Z-led commemorations of the protests in June 2025, and on Sabasaba Day on 7 July, proved that they were not merely political events; they are cultural phenomena. At the heart of this revolution, artists and arts collectives have played a pivotal role, documenting the emotional journeys, visualizing collective traumas, anchoring the diverse array of lived realities, transforming the moments into living galleries and archiving the unfolding contestations. They, the Gen Zs, deployed art to express their message while also documenting these protests for future generations, a vault in which the embers of artistry and demand for change continue to glow.

> **In the face of repression, art is not a sidebar to protest; it is the medium through which a generation claims its voice and writes its history."**

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About Selam - Selam is a Pan-African organisation headquartered in Sweden with regional offices in Addis Ababa and Nairobi. The organisation was created in 1997 and has since evolved into an international player, partnering with artists, cultural producers, the private sector, the media, institutions, researchers, and national and regional governments across the African continent as well in other regions in the world.

Selam participates in global and African culture networks, as well as annual networking meetings and Pan-African conferences in Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. Selam has implemented several regional and national projects and studies on the African continent. Currently Selam implements, together with partners, two Pan-African projects (PANAF and Connect for Culture Africa (CfCA) and one national project in Ethiopia.

About PANAF - The Pan-African Network for Artistic Freedom (PANAF) is an initiative advocating for freedom of artistic expression in the creative sector. PANAF seeks to establish an inclusive voice for organisations, artists and culture producers to demand for safe and enabling environments for artistic creativity in the society.

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