LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Archives of a pandemic: Song and the mitigation of the COVID-19 pandemic in East Africa
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Abstract: Music has always been a reservoir of African cultures and histories. Through music, we can trace the experiences of particular communities at specific moments in history. It has been used to entertain, educate, as well as preserve the histories of communities throughout East African societies. This paper discusses how music in the digital space has played a pivotal role in helping combat the COVID-19 pandemic and also document this moment in time. The paper considers the role of song in mitigating the spread of COVID-19 in East Africa and analyses the work of popular artists involved in this effort. The paper focuses on songs by leading East African artists such as Bobi Wine from Uganda, Mrisho Mpoto from Tanzania, and Salome Wairimu from Kenya. The paper argues that the songs by the said artists have played an important role in helping to mitigate and document the effects of the pandemic in the East African region. In constructing its arguments, the paper leans on critical reflections on the place of the artist in the society as espoused by Okot P’Bitek (1986) and also theoretical postulations on African oral literature as argued by Ruth Finnegan (2016). The paper also considers critical approaches on the place of the arts in past pandemics in Africa by Gregory Barz and Judah M. Cohen (Eds) (2011). The paper concludes by noting that the online spaces and linguistic choices by the studied artists break physical boundaries to present a united front in battling the COVID-19 pandemic in East Africa. It also archives this moment.

Subjects: Performance Theory; Practice and Practitioners; Cultural Studies; Literature; Literature by Geographic Area

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
In this paper, I analyse the music of popular East African musicians, such as Mrisho Mpoto (Tanzania), Bobi Wine (Uganda), and Salome Wairimu (Kenya). Arguing that their songs are important tools in sensitizing communities on ways of protecting themselves against the Coronavirus pandemic. I also state that the songs are important ways of archiving this moment in the fight against the pandemic in the region. I conclude by stating that the online spaces have been important channels of spreading the messages against the Coronavirus pandemic by the artists. By using YouTube and Kiswahili and English in their music, the artists have been able to widely reach audiences across East Africa with their message.
Keywords: Artist; archive; COVID-19; digital space; pandemic; performance; song

1. Archiving the Pandemic through Musical Performances

1.1. Introduction

The role of music in African communities goes beyond entertainment. Music has been used in communities around Africa to educate, praise, and even socialise members of a particular community on their ways of life. Songs provide a vehicle for artists to chronicle significant moments in community history. Ruth Finnegans in *Oral Literature in Africa* (Finnegan, 2016) reiterates the importance of songs to African communities by stating “Song can be used to report and comment on current affairs, for political, for propaganda, and mould public opinion” (265). The place of songs in African communities is also argued by Finnegans when she reads topical songs as songs that “[...] often give a vivid personal picture of a general situation and the attitude to it, as well as of the specific events they comment on” (272). This is an argument not far removed from Okot P’Biteks’s argument in *Artist the Ruler* where he argues that it is artists who create and sustain the world view “[...] that dominates the behaviour of a whole people for generations and also [...] form the basis of moral as well as aesthetic judgment” (38). Artists, as Bitek sees them, are the people who form the consciousness of their time by responding deeply and intuitively to “what is happening, what has happened, what will happen” (39). In this sense, it would therefore be right to argue that artists, other than being chroniclers of present events, are also historians and prophets within communities.

2. The Role of Popular Music in AIDS Prevention

These foundational theoretical interventions by Ruth Finnegans and Okot P’Bitek on the place of song and artists in African communities are further corroborated and grounded by Gregory Barz and Judah M. Cohen *The Culture of AIDS in Africa: Hope and Healing Through Music and the Arts* (Barz & Cohen, 2011) in which various critics look at the place of music and the arts in African societies during the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Barz and Cohen argue that “health interventions inevitably face broad challenges along cultural, political and economic lines [...] And throughout people have sought ways to express the scourge” (4). Music has oftentimes come in to help in mitigating these challenges brought about by pandemics in African societies. Barz and Cohen reinforce this argument when they state that artistic movements around the world gave [...] HIV/AIDS a voice, a sound, and an image (4). The act of singing a medical condition that was unknown to many within the African continent proved to be a vital artistic intervention alongside medical interventions. Giving the AIDS pandemic a voice, a sound, and an image through music helped in battling the stigma associated with the virus and also became a means of helping affected individuals and communities cope with the effects of the disease. Songs such as “Vuta Pumzi” (Inhale) by the Kenyan artist Longombaz emerged as a vital channel to sensitize the Kenyan citizenry on the HIV/AIDS scourge. The song warns and educates its audience on preventive measures against the virus and also how to lead a meaningful life if infected. The use of music and popular culture to battle the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Kenya was also documented by Princess Jully in “Dunia Mbaya” (It’s a bad world). Coming from the Luo community, Princess Jully predominantly sings in Kiswahili as opposed to Dholuo. The linguistic preference situates the artists audience at the national level which widens the scope within which her message is spread. “Dunia Mbaya”, like “Vuta Pumzi” by Longombaz became a vital channel through which messages against the HIV/AIDS virus were passed. Melitus Wanyama and Joseph Okong’o in their study of “Dunia Mbaya” state that the song clearly spells out the dangers of engaging in “illicit love” (271) which increased exposure to the virus. These dangers ranged from facing “certain death, leaving orphans and material possessions” (*The Culture of AIDS in Africa*, 271). While at it, Princess Jully also calls out some of the cultural practices that fanned the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus. Wife inheritance among the Luo community was a rampant cultural practice at the death of the husband and increased infections and deaths in the Luo community. The musical interventions by Longombaz and Princess Jully to the HIV/AIDS pandemic are just but a small reflection on the role artists play in communities during...
medical emergencies. There have been interventions by various artists across the continent on the same pandemic whose significance was equally important. The centrality of music to African communities extends beyond the political, cultural, and spiritual spheres. We can understand African music by looking at its psychological significance. African music can also be looked at as a marker of history. Through this we can trace historical moments in the history of the continent and how the music that came about during these moments spoke of the African human condition.

The tradition of musical interventions to medical calamities within the African content has played a significant role in documenting and archiving the experiences of communities. The success of medical interventions has oftentimes gone together with the success of the arts in communities battling medical epidemics of even pandemic. Through songs artists have entertained and documented the histories of their communities through various historical moments and as such, this paper reads the songs by the selected artists from East Africa exploring their significance in battling the COVID-19 pandemic in the region. Theoretical reflections by Ruth Finnegan and Okot P’Bitek provide the standpoints upon which the arguments in this paper are constructed while the critical interventions to the place of music and the arts in Africa by Barz and Cohen provide the contextual frameworks upon which this paper seeks to build in the discourses of music and artistic interventions to medical crises in African communities.

2.1. Music and the COVID-19 Pandemic in East Africa
The dawn of the 2020s decade was a hopeful one for a majority of Africans across the continent. News of the COVID-19 virus wreaking havoc across China and other Asian countries did not seem to bother those within Africa much since all that seemed to be an experience far removed from the continent. As the year continued the realities of the pandemic began hitting. It became clearer that the cases of the virus reaching East African countries was not a matter of if but a matter of when. This were realities that were confirmed in March of 2020 when all East African countries began registering their first cases of COVID-19. Kenya led the pack; registering her first case on the 12th of March, followed by Tanzania on the 16th of March, and lastly Uganda on the 21st of the same month.

Prior to the first case of COVID-19 in Kenya, the political class had been active in campaigning for constitutional changes through a referendum under the Building Bridges Initiative—BBI. The BBI political campaigns were characterised by Lucky Dube’s “Nobody Can Stop Reggae”. BBI was the reggae that nobody could stop. It was a train that had already left the station and was stopping at nothing. The move to change the constitution was compared with the revolutionary elements of Dube’s song. Then came COVID. And the reggae stopped.

While Marley’s song did not have much to do with alleviating the effects of the pandemic around the East African region, its centrality to the BBI proponents and opponents cannot be ignored. As the country went into lockdowns and curfews to help curb the spread of the virus, the proponents argued that the reggae had been paused while the opponents thanked COVID for their fortunes in having the BBI reggae stopped.

Artistic interventions to curb the pandemic in East Africa were witnessed during periods when the countries were imposing lockdowns and curfews as mitigation measures. Online spaces became crucial in connecting people since physical gatherings had been suspended as a health measure. Platforms such as YouTube became crucial in spreading messages of sensitizing the public on the pandemic.

Mrisho Mpoto is a popular musician from Tanzania, East Africa. Other than being a musician, Mpoto is also a poet and an activist. His songs focus on issues such as “[..] bad governance, people’s dishonesty in society, the negative effects of diseases like AIDS as well as social and global changes […]” (Makhuula, 2019). Mrisho Mpoto led the front in using the digital space as an avenue for sensitising his audience on the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside THT, Mpoto released
“Kwaheri Corona” on YouTube. Other than sensitizing the Tanzanians on how to deal with the virus, the artists borrow from Tanzanian political history and use the lyrics of the song as reminders of the resilience and the might of the Tanzanians. The artists render the song using a warning and also a proud tone so as to inform their audience against the Coronavirus. In the first stanza, Mpoto derides the virus by telling it that it is a stranger in a country filled with patriots and nationalist who unite during calamities. The artist asks the virus:

Corona wewe ni nani?  
Umekuja kwa ajili ya nani?  
Unahitaji nini tukupe uondoke?  
Tuko tayari kukuchinjia jogoo,  
Tuliye muweka kwaajili ya mbegu

[Translation]  
Corona, who are you?  
What has brought you here?  
What do you from us for you to leave?  
We are ready to slaughter a cockerel for you,  
Whom we had reared for seed,  
To express his frustration with the virus, the artist wonders “who” the virus is and for what reason it has come to Tanzania. His frustration and impatience with the coronavirus is foregrounded with the last three verses of the stanza. In these verses, the artists reveal that they are ready to sacrifice their cockerel to the coronavirus so that it can leave. This is a stanza that on its own can be interpreted to mean surrender on the part of the Tanzanians, but it is in the succeeding stanzas that their resilience and pride in themselves and their nationality is revealed.

In the stanza, Mpoto sings that:

Corona, sisi viTanzania,  
Wajuku wa Nyerere  
Tunayeongozwa na jemedari wetu Maghfufuli  
Timu ya ushindii,  
Tuna makabila mia moja na ishirini,  
Watu milioni hamsini na nane  
Kumbuka corona, wewe ni kidudu tu, tena mmoja  
Sisi ni wamoja,  
Wenye uzalendo, utaifa ndani yetu  
Linapokuja janga kama la ujiowako  
Tunakuwa kitu kimoja, tunaungana  
Je, tukichinjje jogoo wetu au utaondoka?

[Translation]  
Corona, we are Tanzanians,  
The grandchildren of Nyerere  
Being led by our General, Maghfufuli,  
A winning team!  
We have one hundred and twenty tribes  
Fifty-eight million people.
Corona, remember you are just but a single virus
We are one,
Imbued with patriotism and nationalism,
When faced with a calamity like yours,
We become one. We unite.
So, should we slaughter the cock or you’ll leave?
The mystery of the Coronavirus is contrasted with the heritage that Tanzanians pride themselves in. It is a heritage that has been tied down to the leadership of the country as evidenced by the artists identifying the Tanzanians as the grandchildren of Nyerere, who was the founding president of Tanzania and also Magufuli who is the current president of the nation. The heritage provides a sense of belonging and purpose to the Tanzanians and this is evident when the artists state that “Sisi ni wmoja, wenyu uzalendo na uataifa” which means that the 58 million Tanzanians are united and share a sense of patriotism and nationalism—values the artist deems important in the fight against the pandemic.

The memories of Nyerere are revisited and recast in the contemporary society not just as a source of pride and heritage but as a source of mapping the trajectory the country has taken in facing previous crises. Whereas the artists acknowledge the impending victory against the current Coronavirus pandemic in Tanzania, the foundations of this victory are said to have been laid by the Nyerere administration. This is an assertion evident in the stanza in which the artists speak of Tanzania at independence. Mpoto and THT note that:

**Baada ya uhuru,**
**Mwalimu alitangazia umma moaudei watatu,**
**Ujinga, maradhí, na umaskini,**
**You know what?**
**Tulimtandika asubuhi mapema,**
**Maana sababu na utayari tulikuwa nao**

[Translation]
Corona,
After independence,
Mwalimu announced to the public three enemies
Ignorance, disease, and poverty.
You know what?
We beat them early in the morning
Because we were prepared

The stanza is a reminder of the priorities of Tanzania’s first administration. These are priorities that were documented in the Arusha Declaration of 1967 in which the founding government, led by Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, sought to “[...] mobilize all the resources of this country towards the elimination of poverty, ignorance and disease” (2). The inclusion of political themes in the songs of Mpoto as a means of awakening the consciousness of the people on specific social issues has been noted by Makhulu (2019) where he notes that Mpoto “… bases his songs mostly on themes of political leadership” (9). The theme of political leadership in “Kwaheri Corona” serves as a foundation upon which the fight against Coronavirus is built upon. After narrating the political and demographic background of Tanzania, the artists transition to sensitizing the public on how the virus is transmitted and how to keep oneself safe. This is seen when Mpoto relays that the COVID-19 virus is spread rapidly when people gather in multitudes and also when people shake hands. This message is relayed when Mpoto sings that:
Nataka niwakute kwa wingi,
Haya tumegoma kukusanyika
Nitawapata kwenyae salamu za mikononi
Hatushikani mikono,

[Translation]
I want to meet them in public gatherings,
Public gatherings have been suspended,
I want to shake their hands,
We can't shake hands,

Having warned the public on how the virus is transmitted, Mpoto moves to relaying the mitigation measures that every individual in Tanzania has been made aware of. The mitigation measures include the washing of hands with soap and rinsing them with running water. Mpoto concludes by informing the Tanzanians that to win the war against the COVID-19 virus, each of them has to take seriously the washing of hands. He ends the song by noting that “Kila mmoja wetu ananafasi ya kunawa mikono, Kulinda nchi yetu ya Tanzania”. This is a verse that implies that everyone has the responsibility of washing their hands so as to protect Tanzania. It a verse that also echoes the patriotic responsibility that every individual has to the nation itself in the fight against the Coronavirus.

Ugandan artists Bobi Wine and Nubian Li also embarked on sensitizing their audience on the Coronavirus in their song “Coronavirus Alert”, which they sing in English. Bobi Wine, born Robert Kyangulanyi, is popular musician from Uganda, East Africa. Other than being known for his political ambitions, Wine's music is famed for its socially conscious message that seeks to speak against the ills of poor leadership. The song Corona Alert was released on 27 April 2020. Like his counterpart in Tanzania, Wine's music speaks of the ways of reducing the spread of the virus in Uganda as well as the symptoms of the disease.

The arguments on the role of Mpoto's music in battling the COVID-19 pandemic in Tanzania could also be extended to the music of Uganda's Bobi Wine. Wine, who is an artist cum politician, is the perfect embodiment of the power artists have in the society. Their voice could entertain just as it could inspire social and political movements. As though aware of his influence among the Ugandan youth, Wine and Nubian Li at the beginning of the pandemic in Ugandan, released, “Coronavirus Alert” which still plays a huge role in Uganda's effort in battling the pandemic. This alert by Wine and Li calls the Ugandans to action in the fight against the Coronavirus. The artists sing that:

The bad news is that everyone is a potential victim,
but the good news is that everyone is a potential solution.
Sensitise the masses to sanitize, keep a social distance and quarantine.
In painting everyone as both a potential victim and a potential solution, Wine and Li indicate the responsibility every individual has in containing the pandemic. Characterising one as a victim carries with it a warning that one should not be reckless in handling their health. Characterising one as a solution reminds each listener that they do have a role to play in eradicating this pandemic from their communities. The individual risks and responsibilities painted in the first stanza of the song are given meaning in the last verse of the first stanza. The artists remind their audience to sanitise their hands, keep a social distance, and also quarantine themselves. These are measures that have been outlined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as key in helping to fight the virus, in addition to wearing of masks when in public places.
In the succeeding verses the artists alert their audience that they cannot take the disease for granted. This is seen when they sing that the “Coronavirus is sweeping over mankind” and that everyone must be alert to the global pandemic. The artists then list the symptoms of the virus as “serious fever”, “dry cough”, “sneezing”, and even “flu”. Like Mpoto and THT in Tanzania, Wine and Li remind Ugandans that to fight the disease, they must regularly wash their hands and also maintain high standards of personal hygiene.

In “Coronavirus Alert” the artists consider the fight against the virus a patriotic duty. They demystify the virus and its effects to an audience that would have otherwise been ignorant and exposed to the risks related to the virus. The safety and sustainability of the Ugandan society is anchored on the choices individuals make in keeping themselves safe. Bobi Wine and Nubian Li in this case are valuable conduits of scientific information to their audience which might otherwise not be familiar with the scientific jargon. As they are accepted in his community, the artists use his platform to warn and educate. The efforts of the artist in the community complement those of the scientist in the lab trying to come up with a vaccine or a cure for the virus.

Unlike the Tanzanian and Ugandan artistes who focused on sensitizing their audiences against the virus, Kenyan artist Salome Wairimu in “Janga la Corona” (Corona Pandemic) relays the effects of the pandemic in the country. Wairimu, a class six pupil, laments that the disease that originated from China was initially thought to be a common cold which had no cure. To show the progression of the virus across the world, the artist sings that:

Haukuenea Uchina peke yake
Bali hata mataifà mengine yaliadhirika
Vifo navyo vilianza kushuhudiwa
Hívyo bási watu wote tukashikwa na kíwewe

[Translation]
Corona did not spread in China only,
Many nations were also affected,
Deaths also began being witnessed,
As such all of us became worried.

This stanza speaks of how the Coronavirus spread not only within China but also across the world leaving behind a trail of death and sorrow. Trail of sorrow left by the pandemic is seen not just in the deaths that occurred but also the closure of a majority of social institutions within the country. The sorrowful mood in the song is seen by the artist’s choice of words which reflect the feeling. Words such as “kiwewe” (worry), “huzunika” (grieving), and “shingo upande” (unwillingly) advance the sadness that characterises the song. The artist acknowledges both the physical and the psychological effects of the pandemic which involved the stoppage of all social gatherings including the closure of schools. The closure of all learning institutions and also the cessation of air travel in the country compound the sorrow reflected in the song. As the artist sees it, the closure of learning institutions on the 15th of March 2020 will be a lasting memory in the students and she reiterates this when she states that the date “itakuwa kumbukumbu miongoni mwa wanafunzi”.

The song’s sorrowful tone is not just accentuated by its verses but also by the sad beat through which the song is rendered. The artist finishes the song by calling on the God to help in keeping her audience safe from the virus. She states that “Mola twakuomba tupepuhe na janga hili”. The reliance on God in this song for protection against the virus is unlike the songs by Mrisho Mpoto and Bobi Wine in which protection against the virus is firmly anchored on a collaboration between scientific and social efforts.
Of the analysed artists and their performances, what is notable amongst them save for Salome Wairimu in “Janga la Corona” is that they all collaborate in passing across their message with music. The collaboration between the artists is reflection of the message they are passing through their performances; a message of unity in battling the Coronavirus pandemic in the region. Communal efforts in fighting the pandemic in the region are foregrounded in the analysed music. This borrows from the precedent set in battling the HIV/AIDS pandemic in East Africa where communities were critical bases for passing information against the virus. Even as this paper argues for the artists and the context of their performances, the issue of audiences remains central to scholarship on performance. The audience forms a community through which messages are transmitted. It is for this reason that the next section of this paper looks at the centrality of audiences in the digital space in the performance of the analysed artists.

2.2. Performance, Audience and the Digital Space

The presence of an audience has always been a key factor in any performances. For an artist to be a ruler, there has to be an acceptance by their audience which bestows upon them the power of influence. This assertion has been noted by Wabende (2020) when he states that “Performance is seen to take place when a performer enacts an act in the presence of an audience” (89). Wabende acknowledges that technology has, however, redefined the conceptualisation of the term audience and also performance space since online spaces have emerged and have proven to be “… readily available to the performer and audience due to ease of access …” (89). Wabende’s argument on the place of the digital space in performance is critical to this paper especially with the effects of the COVID-19 virus in East Africa, one being the banishment of social gatherings.

Performances have always been enacted in front of live audiences but technological developments and the spread of the Coronavirus across the world catalysed a shift towards online spaces through which performers and audiences interact. The online spaces have broadened the boundaries of the audience reached. An analysis of the songs studied in this paper corroborate this argument on two fronts. First, the use of Kiswahili as the preferred language by the selected artists ensures that their message transcends their national boundaries to the regional boundaries. This is because Kiswahili is the lingua franca of East African countries. Both Mrisho Mpoto in “Kwaheri Corona” and Salome Wairimu in “Janga la Corona” use Kiswahili predominantly. Coupled with their popularity across the region, the use of Kiswahili ensures that the message of combating COVID-19 in the region is received by a wider audience. Bobi Wine on the other hand uses English predominantly, which is equally understood across the region, and thus widens the reach of his message.

The second way in which the online spaces have broadened the boundaries of the audience is with the use of the digital space as a performance and a sensitization platform which has become effective for the artists since it ensures not just their safety but also the safety of their audiences in the era of social distancing. The utilisation of digital spaces is also crucial in minimising costs since the artists and their audiences do not have to incur the costs of traveling across the region to meet with each other for sensitization against the spread and effects of Coronavirus but instead do it at the comfort of their studios and homes. The success of the online space for the artists and their audiences is gauged by the views garnered on YouTube for each music. Mrisho Mpoto, who was the first artist to release his performance got over 100,000 views for his song, whereas Bobi Wine and Salome Wairimu equally got over 1.5 million views. The number of views for these songs act as measures of the wide reach the artists had with their audiences. Gathering such mammoth audiences for physical performances spaces would have been a logistical, financial, and also a health challenge for everyone involved.

2.3. Conclusion

It may take a while before we can actually state the impact music in East Africa had in mitigating the spread of the COVID-19 virus across the region but what is true is that the artists through their performances helped demystify the virus and also help their communities and regional audiences learn how to fight it. Musical efforts stand side by side with the scientific contributions in
combating the pandemic. The analysed artists gave the scientists and institutions such as the World Health Organisation a platform through which scientific jargon could be broken down and consumed by every member of the community from which the artists came.

The historical contributions of the performances are unquestionable since the performers situate this moment in historical timelines. As argued by Ruth Finegan, the topical songs studied in this paper provide a detailed account of this moment in the history of East Africa. The availability of technological advancements such as the internet and computers are crucial factors in archiving not just the music but also the moment and the message of the COVID-19 pandemic from East Africa. Technological advancements have also shown the resilience and adaptability of the human spirit. This was seen in the speed with which musicians in the region, and across the globe, moved to embrace the online platform as a means of reaching their audience at a time when they could not reach them physically. The audience, in embracing the message from the artists, spread through the online platform, affirm that the artist is indeed the ruler.

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**Note**
1. THT (Tanzania House of Talent) is an organisation that was established in 2005 with the “aim of providing music, dance, and theatre lessons to Tanzanians for enjoyment, education and employment opportunities.” [https://www.musicafrica.net/directory/tanzania-house-talent-tht](https://www.musicafrica.net/directory/tanzania-house-talent-tht)

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