UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

# Bongo Flava Nation:

# The Confluence of Popular Music and Politics in Tanzania

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

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in Ethnomusicology

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnomusicology

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Professor Cheryl L. Keyes, Chair

In this dissertation, I situate the term "bongo flava" as way to understand the various intersections of popular music and politics in Tanzania. I discuss two distinct yet related genres of popular music in this regard – Tanzanian hip hop and pop music, known today as bongo flava. When the term bongo flava was coined in the 1990s, it was originally a form of hip hop, sonically and extra-sonically. More specifically, bongo flava was a way for citizens to provide a critique of the state, and an exposé of the problems that said citizens face. However, the paths of hip hop and pop music in Tanzania, once intertwined with each other, have now become separate in today's musical landscape. Both Tanzanian hip hop and bongo flava today have an interest in politics; politics, or *siasa* in Swahili, is a loaded term, whose definition changes based on who is

speaking about it. For many rappers in the Tanzanian hip hop underground, politics is disconnected from the lives of regular citizens, and so these rappers understand themselves as representing the "true" lives of Tanzanians. This can be understood as a continuation of the original social critique that was present in bongo flava in the 1990s. Bongo flava, as pop music today, is a genre deeply intertwined with the politicking of the ruling political party in Tanzania, provides a different and competing version of reality that directly colludes with the government. For both musical worlds, social media is a place to promote one's culture, whether that be through directly selling underground rap tapes to fans via Instagram, or advertising a sold out stadium show as a bongo flava pop star. Additionally, in both of these worlds, there is a representation of ideal masculinity by artists in these spaces. It is through proper masculinity performances that these artists can earn political legitimacy, broadly defined. Bongo flava has been previously understood to represent Tanzanian hip hop only. However, this dissertation seeks to expand the definition of bongo flava to mean a political ethos of survival, a representation of Tanzania on the international scale, a popular music aesthetic, and a way to critique the Tanzanian government. Ultimately, this dissertation argues for the term bongo flava to represent the way popular music, as a whole, interacts with Tanzanian political life.

The dissertation of Lucas Jordan Avidan is approved.

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# Chapter I:

# Introduction

## Overview

Translated literally, the name of the Tanzanian genre *bongo flava* means "flavor of the brains" in Swahili. The word *bongo* is a reference to *ubongo*[1], referring to "brains" or intelligence in general, and *flava* is phonetic borrowing from English. In more idiomatic contexts, *ubongo* can mean both Dar es Salaam as well as Tanzania in general. Alex Perullo notes that *bongo* is also slang for "survival of the fittest," and references a "mentality that [Tanzanians] must maintain in order to survive in an economically impoverished country" (Perullo 2011: 8). Dar es Salaam, as well as Tanzania as a whole, also can be referred to with the term "Bongoland"; here, we can understand this term as both endearment and pride for one's country (there is no other place in the world that can be called Bongoland) while also recognizing the difficulty inherent in living here. Bongo flava, thus, is also a term used to describe the ever-evolving popular music sound coming out of Tanzania, with the word "flava" implying a "flavor of the week" aspect to this music, meaning that its sonic aspects are both fad-like but also on-trend. Describing the sound of bongo flava is about as simple as asking someone to describe what American popular music sounds like – the question in itself requires a clarification of time period. Bongo flava has incorporated elements of zouk, reggae, reggaeton, hip hop, Afrobeats, taarab, muziki wa dansi, and amapiano, but not all at once – all of these genres have at one point either influenced or been the prevailing sound in bongo flava before

[1] In Swahili, there is a class of nouns starting with "u" which modify an otherwise countable noun or adjective. For example, *nzuri*, meaning "good" can be modified with u to create *uzuri*, meaning "goodness" or "beauty." The word *bongo* in bongo flava, with its various idiomatic meanings, can be understood to mostly be referencing the u-form of said noun *ubongo*, instead of its literal translation of "brain."

being passed on to the next new sound. Thus, the question of "what is bongo flava" should first be answered with "during which period of Tanzania's history?"

The period during which bongo flava and hip hop were synonymous has been studied extensively in the American academy. At one point, bongo flava was understood to be a catch all term for hip hop in Tanzania, but most rappers in Tanzania today would dissuade you from that notion being true. Some would even argue that these two terms being synonymous was never true, and hip hop in Tanzania has always maintained some distance from bongo flava. One perspective on this comes from Lugombo Makanta, a rapper from Mbeya, who argued that the name "bongo flava" was just a radio DJ's description of the hip hop being made in the late 90s. Specifically, he argues that "It was all hip hop before bongo flava," and that the history of hip hop in Tanzania is much longer than the life of bongo flava as a genre (Gego Master and Lugombo Makanta, interview by author, Dar es Salaam, March 28, 2022). In that same interview, Gego Master, another rapper and hip hop scholar who was speaking with us, argues that bongo flava isn't even a genre of music, but rather an umbrella term for a number of genres, aesthetics, and popular culture products. Specifically, he argues "Kwa hiyo, bongo flava is just an umbrella, sio music genre, sindiyo? Sio music genre kabisa kwa sababu watu walifanya muziki ambao walijua waliteji" [*Therefore, bongo flava is just an umbrella, it's not a music genre, right? It's not an entire music genre because people made music that they knew would be popular*] (Gego Master and Lugombo Makanta, 2022). Gego's point here is the key to understanding just what exactly bongo flava is. Thus, the temporal nature of bongo flava's sonic characteristics means that it cannot be accurately described as hip hop, since it follows what trends and fashions will be popular and profitable.

When the term "bongo flava" was initially coined in the early 1990s, it meant a conflation of hip hop, popular music, local politics and a unifying understanding of self-reliance and survival of the fittest. Musically, there previously exists a conflation of hip hop and popular music in Tanzania all being called bongo flava. However, I argue for various critiques of this conflation, utilizing fieldwork data from my digital ethnography and my interviews with underground rappers, who all see themselves and their culture as being distinct from bongo flava and a separate musical and political world. This dissertation seeks to understand and unpack the ways bongo flava as an ethos has been split into various worlds in the Tanzanian popular music space. Bongo flava initially was considered a music of survival and hustle in the 1980s in Tanzania, which is why hip hop felt at home in what could be considered a "do it yourself," "survival of the fittest" ethos. It is these kinds of attitudes that persist in Tanzanian hip hop today, and these attitudes can be understood both in the way the music sounds, representations of masculinity that exist within the music, and the political critiques that feel inherent in Tanzanian hip hop's lyrics. On the other hand, bongo flava as a culture of social media and popular celebrity culture continues to represent Tanzania domestically and internationally. It is polished and clean music that promotes similar ideas of hustling to Tanzanian hip hop. It too demonstrates ideal masculinity for the Tanzanian population, but is uncritical of the government aside from election years, where there is collusion between the genre's biggest stars and the ruling political party. This is what most rappers would consider to be bongo flava, as music that has sold out and isn't "legitimate."

A significant goal of this dissertation is to re-imagine bongo flava as being both representative of Tanzanian popular music as a whole, as well as being a specific music tied to the support of the government, with its counterpart being Tanzanian hip hop. More broadly, I

aim to situate this thesis alongside a larger history of African and Tanzanian cultural politics, two arenas wherein music has been explicitly and implicitly part of state building and nationalism. Bongo flava's participation in popular culture more generally in Tanzania means it has an essential relationship with young people. However, political power in Tanzania, among other East African nations, is articulated through various performances of masculinity, often times in the positioning of oneself as an elder. Navigating specific masculinity performances is crucial for success as both a bongo flava musician who is seeking financial success as well as a Tanzanian hip hop artist looking to be deemed authentic. Bongo flava (and to a lesser extent, Tanzanian hip hop) lives on social media, which is crucial for dispersing popular culture to the Tanzanian populus. Thus, the ways in which power is articulated through politics is closely tied to the ways cultures moves and is tracked on social media. Bongo flava, as a musical genre, a form of popular culture, a political ethos, and a survival strategy, represents the various ways one can understand the interactions between popular music and politics in Tanzania today, broadly defined.

**Contributions to the Field**

I understand my dissertation to contribute to a number of academic spaces, connected to African cultural politics, popular music and social media, masculinity in East Africa, and histories of political economy in Tanzania. First, I aim to connect Tanzanian hip hop and bongo flava to a longer history of music and politics along the Swahili coast. This is not the first time a narrative of popular music in Tanzania has been written. For example, Kelly Askew has done excellent work on the emergence of taraab as a political genre; Frank Gunderson's work on muziki wa dansi and DDC Mlimani Orchestra being popular articulations of urban life is another excellent academic inspiration to this dissertation. The study of popular music has made

significant inroads in the academy in the twenty-first century, and I intend to continue legitimizing it as a source of political action, activism, and in some cases, authoritarian activity. I do not think that music alone can change material conditions, but I am invested in understanding how it can lead marginalized members of society down the road to real change. Additionally, the development of bongo flava music has been theorized in being directly related to the shift in economic policy that occurred under Tanzania's second president, Ali Hassan Mwinyi. However, the last monograph that explored the way economics has affected the bongo flava industry was published about a decade ago. I aim to continue this narrative with updated research and interviews, in order to describe how the industry has changed in the last decade. To historically inform my ethnography, I draw on the work done by scholars such as Priya Lal and Paul Ocobock that theorize the way power was wielded and administrated in East Africa during the colonial and post-colonial periods. I see a real connection in the ways that Tanzanians dealt with variations in political power and economic conditions during the ujamaa period and the enterprising, "survival of the fittest" attitude in the emergence of bongo flava. The paradigm of the "elder state," as coined by Ocobock in writing on post-colonial Kenya, describes the way masculinity and age are essential for maintaining status in East Africa. I believe the hirearchy of musicians and executives in bongo flava can similarly be described in this sense. Additionally, similar to other genres of hip hop, masculinity greatly informs performance practices and understandings of persona in Tanzanian hip hop. Overall, this work contributes to the way scholars can understand how East African culture informs its music and political situation.

Additionally, I see this work as updating the already significant work that has been done on the genre of bongo flava, as both a form of hip hop and popular music. Since the genre's emergence, there has been excellent work done identifying it as a form of Tanzanian hip hop and

connecting the genre to the world of Tanzanian youth culture. However, the popular music side of bongo flava, alongside its existence on social media, has rarely been worked on with serious scholarly significance, or even mentioned in passing. For example, Diamond Platnumz' name is hardly mentioned in work on the genre, and scholars have often skirted the pop side of bongo flava to instead focus on rappers maintaining the older tradition of rapping for social change. However, the music made by Diamond and his pop contemporaries is arguably the music that most Tanzanians are familiar with, and so it becomes crucial to take a more critical lens to the production, distribution, and political understanding of this music. As previously mentioned, I believe in the political efficacy of popular music, even if the music's content and production do not directly cite social issues. It is music that is widespread and designed to be attractive, and thus shapes society's understanding of itself.

Additionally, the ways I address interactions between popular music and the state draws on and contributes to the world of hip hop studies. While originally, this field has been concerned with the academic study of hip hop culture domestically, in the United States, more recently, hip hop studies has gone global. Scholars who research the emergence of rap music and hip hop cultures outside of the United States can offer even more insight into the malleability of hip hop culture, and provide interesting and informative foils to the American hip hop scene. Africa is an oft-cited area for the emergence of hip hop, and for many, there exists a persistent idea that "rap has arrived home, in Africa"; however, as Eric Charry notes, this concept should not be taken uncritically and demands more serious investigation (Charry 2012: 1). Global hip hop monographs sometimes describe the ways in which hip hop, as a worldwide phenomenon, is adapted to local musical cultures, such as in the work of Adriana Helbig or Griffith Rollefson. With this dissertation, I am less interested in acculturation or localization narratives in Tanzanian

hip hop; rather, I am concerned with exploring representations of politics in the genre. Specifically, my research argues that the word for politics in Swahili, *siasa*, is an incompatible adjective to many rappers when describing the music and culture they create and share. Hip hop cultures manifest themselves differently throughout the globe, and one of the biggest differences between the cultures in the US and Tanzanian hip hop is that for the latter, hip hop is not a political genre, something which is taken almost for granted in the former.

Finally, this dissertation explores the way bongo flava manifests itself online. Digital fieldwork is a sector of academic research that in many ways has always been a part of any fieldwork project, but since the COVID-19 pandemic, has been approached with increased interest, as many of us have moved our projects to the virtual sphere. Theorizing and exploring the public space of social media through ethnographic research will add to the fast-growing world of digital ethnography. I also believe that in order to fully understand how bongo flava relates to the Tanzanian state, it is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of this relationship online. It is here, in addressing the social media culture of bongo flava, that I believe my work can contribute most greatly to the study of the genre. Additionally, I hope that this work can add to the much-recorded history of media and the construction of the state.

## Review of Literature

### *African Cultural Politics*

There has been excellent work on popular music and politics in Africa in the field of ethnomusicology, and I am interested in centering my work within this academic tradition. This includes scholars like Krystal Klingenberg and Charles Lwanga[2] on the political nature of

[2] Both scholars' work is currently in progress, and published books and articles from them are forthcoming.

Ugandan popular music artist and politician Bobi Wine. Additionally, Gavin Steingo has also written on South African kwaito music, a form of electronic music that deals directly with post-Apartheid politics. On Tanzanian popular music, Kelly Askew has written on the performance of state power and politics in a historical survey of Tanzania's musical forms. While Askew's primary focus here is on interpersonal politics contained within taraab music, her book also centers on the way genres such as muziki wa dansi and ngoma have also been a part of articulating what Tanzanian national culture is. I positon my research as picking up where her work ends, continuing the work of articulating the relationship between Tanzanian music and the state. Her rich history of politics and culture that begins even before the founding of Tanzania in 1964 greatly informs the way I understand the state to interact with bongo flava today.

There has yet to be substantial research, however, on how bongo flava, as a distinctly pro-establishment music, fits into the literature of political popular music. Scholars have often written less on the pop side of bongo flava to instead focus on rappers maintaining the older tradition of rapping for social change. However, the music made by Diamond and his pop contemporaries is arguably the music that most Tanzanians are familiar with, and so it becomes crucial to take a more critical lens to the production, distribution, and political understanding of this music. I believe in the political efficacy of popular music, even if the music's content and production do not directly cite social issues. It is music that is widespread and designed to be attractive, and thus has serious potential to shape a society's understanding of itself.

Bongo flava has been written about in the world of ethnomusicology, but it has been primarily understood as it existed in its original incarnation as hip hop. It is often cited as an example of the worldwide adoption of hip hop and at one point, the name "bongo flava" was synonymous with Tanzanian rap and hip hop. Alex Perullo has written on this genre as a form of

rap music that in its early iterations "addressed social and political issues" (Perullo 2011: 363). Perullo additionally contributes a chapter on bongo flava in his Eric Charry's volume *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World.* Charry's introduction to the book, "A Capsule History of African Rap," is an excellent resource for recounting the flows of culture that helped rap music to develop in various African urban centers. In Perullo's chapter on bongo flava, he argues that the genre follows a historical pattern of "imitation of foreign music," which has been "central to the formation of several Tanzanian popular music genres" (Perullo 2012: 188). Notably, however, he additionally is unhappy with hybridity theories that describe the development of music genres, and utilizes the term "innovation," to describe the ways "artists alter the sounds, uses, and interpretations of music" (Perullo 2012: 189). This chapter describes the study of bongo flava, even as it has transformed into a popular music genre as of the last two decades, as rooted in understandings of hybridity and synchronization.

A significant part of my ethnography is tied to the careers and leisure time of young men, and I seek to connect my work with the literature surrounding leisure time and masculinity in Africa more generally. Brad Weiss' work on barbershops and masculinity as it relates to hip hop culture in Tanzania provides crucial context for the contingent nature of many young men in the country. Through fieldwork in Arusha, he argues that barbershops, where many young men congregate and work, are in fact sites where young men can both participate in a globalized society through the consumption of hip hop culture, and be estranged economically from said society. Commenting on the decreased ability for young men to remain employed following neoliberal reforms in Tanzania, Weiss argues "the exaggerated masculinity of barbershops…bespeak a purpose to male bodies and relations in a world where the men's productive capacity is extremely tenuous" (Weiss 2009: 22).

Similarly, Michael Ralph utilizes his ethnography of tea drinking amongst young men in Senegal to articulate a similar sense of contingency. Young people, with not much to their names besides their own bodies and free time, are "permanently disarticulated from civil society," and often, on a political level, imagined as the site of social unrest" (Ralph 2008: 11). This listless and simultaneously restless nature stems from the "little investment in state-sponsored projects designed to stretch the nation's limited wealth," and ultimately defines the lifestyles of many young Senegalese men. In Mozambique, Archaumbault describes how mobility, both in the economic and literal sense, is hindered for young people. A salve to this constraint is the country's embrace of mobile phones, which in many ways solve issues of contact and immobility that many young people have. However, this does not fix the political reality that many young people, most notably secondary school educated ones, "lack the capital necessary to secure formal employment or to start their own business" (Archaumbault 2012: 397). Similar to nostalgic sentiments regarding *ujamaa* in Tanzania, many young people in Mozambique express "nostalgia for 'the time of Samora,' a common way of referring to the country's socialist period" (Archaumbault: 396). This nostalgia for a "simpler time" is misplaced; however, it still reflects the expectation of employment that was easier to fulfill in the past than it is now. Sometimes, this restlessness is harnessed for political gain, and in South Africa, Hannah Dawson writes on the idea that young people are politically volatile and present at protests because of their indeterminate employment status. Protests are a way to "demonstrate the anger and frustration that many youth harbor," and often why young people are focused on so closely by the state (Dawson 2014: 881). In Tanzania, there is a similar sense of young people as politically volatile, which is perhaps why so much government messaging through bongo flava music is focused on the youth. Ultimately, in all of these cases, young people in Africa wrestle with the expectations

of financial stability and actualization that are both increasingly unattainable in their current societal conditions.

However, before a trend of neoliberalization across the African continent, there were attempts to create societies with state sponsored support networks for citizens. Priya Lal writes on the Tanzanian *ujamaa* socialist experiment, and notes that looking back, it is easy to simply say *ujamaa* was a "mere historical curiosity," or, in more conservative appraisals, a confirmation of "the generalized dysfunction of postcolonial African politics" (Lal 2017: 4). However, Lal's work interrogates the disconnect between *ujamaa*'s lofty goals from the Nyerere government and the ways average citizens managed with its cultural and economic policies. The book ends with an outline of a similar discussion in the post socialist era; Lal argues that the material hardships of this major transition were often managed "by relying on tactics of flexibility…that they honed during villagization" (Lal: 25). Bongo flava music was born out of a desire to improve material conditions through personal financial advancement and political advocacy. Thus, Lal's work provides crucial context for the economic underpinnings of why bongo flava was deemed so radical and important at its inception.

Looking to today, bongo flava occupies a similar space to previous cultural products in that it exists in the world of youth and exerts its power in the spaces young people inhabit. Ntarangwi argues that the youth of East Africa are often "left out of important socioeconomic and political commentaries and decision-making processes," and through hip hop, said youth are able to attain their own agency (Ntarangwi 2009: 3). In post-colonial Kenya, masculinity and age were developed alongside power, leading to what Paul Ocobock calls "elder state," where in Kenya, "statecraft necessitated posing as an elder" (Ocobock 2017: 4). In the world of bongo flava, the paradigm of the elder state persists, as power in the genre, both in its inception as well

as today, often stems from a sense of elder masculinity. Some artists today claim this power by referring to themselves as "OGs," or original gangstas, a term from American hip hop implying a wizened experience as an artist. Diamond Platnumz, through both his entrepreneurial acts as well as his interactions with various Tanzanian politicians, additionally wields this power over younger, less successful artists. The recent elevation of Samia Hassan to the title of presidency calls into question this existing paradigm, and I am interested in how a state (and its music) which administers power through elder masculinity manages the first female president.

*On Social Media and Archives*

In researching the ways in which this music connects with the broader scope of Tanzanian politics and understandings of nationalism, ethnography on social media will be a primary source for analysis. The rich literature of archive studies, as well as theorizations on the Habermasian public sphere are both spaces that I think my work can contribute to. Sylvia Nannyonga-Tamasuza's work on constructing the "popular" in Ugandan music archives addresses questions of access and the role of the archivist / archive in constructing what is remembered. She notes that "the archiving of music in Uganda is left to the private sphere, to the personal collections of individuals and a few private organizations" (Nannyonga-Tamasuza 2006: 35). This is not to say that archives are better off in the hands of the state, but rather to call attention to constantly understanding the archive as shaping the events that are remembered. She also cites a more important comment on the construction of archives from Manoff, which reads "An archive should be viewed as a reconstruction – a recording of history from a particular perspective; it cannot provide transparent access of the events themselves" (Nannyonga-Tamasuza: 34). In the context of social media, this is an especially important aspect to

remember, because social media often creates realistic facsimiles of life. Even a video of an event is mediated and edited, and it cannot replace being at the event.

I also see my work as applying conceptions of a "public," or a "public sphere" (in the Habermasian sense) to the world of social media studies. While Habermas' core text *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* can be useful as a starting point, I find that Nancy Fraser's article "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" provides a much richer theoretical basis for my work. Her writing correctly identifies Habermas' theory as stopping only within the circles of male dominated bourgeois society. She argues that his analysis on the construction of the public sphere can be applied to other publics that exist in what she calls "actually existing democracy" (Fraser 1990: 57). She attempts to combine Habermas' theory with more pragmatic, real world examples to what I contend to be mixed results, but I do agree with her contestation that it is "not possible to insulate special discursive arenas [or public spheres] from the effects of social inequality"; social inequality is ultimately created by the citizens that occupy a society, so spaces similarly created by the same citizens will still retain said inequality (Fraser: 66).

Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* is perhaps the most useful text I have for understanding social media as a public sphere. While he doesn't explicitly deal with social media, his definitions on what defines a public sphere, or "public," can apply to spaces on various social media websites. Perhaps his most important contribution to my own thinking about social media is his definition that a public is "the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (Warner 2008: 90). Social media, especially a social media world like the one that exists in bongo flava culture, can be adequately described through this paradigm. The space of social media may exist, as a website or an app, but it does not become a public

space without discourse that is understood, altered, and then passed along. The way social media encourages this kind of circulation, through technical ideas such as sharing and liking, makes it an excellent creator of public spheres. Ultimately, these conceptions of social media as a public can help define the limits of bongo flava social media, and shed light on who is able to contribute to this online community.

Social media is a significant part of the bongo flava scene in Tanzania thanks to the increased access to the internet via the cellphone. While cell phone usage remains relatively low in Tanzania compared to similar countries on the continent, younger, usually more educated Tanzanians have adopted the smartphone into their daily lives. Coinciding with this increase is the availability of bongo flava content on social media, aimed to allow fans, both locally and internationally, to follow along with the latest releases, bongo flava artist news, and chat with fans around the globe. Msia Kibona Clark has written on the usage of social media in bongo flava, specifically on individual artist's strategies for garnering professional success through these sites. At the time of her paper's publication, in 2014, she noted that "the majority of the population is not online"; while the adoption of the smartphone is increasing, this remains to be the case throughout Tanzania today (Kibona Clark 2014: 1115). Additionally, she highlights an important point in the media landscape of bongo flava, which is that "Large media corporations have resources to pay for higher visibility for their content on social media, giving them an unfair advantage" (Kibona Clark: 1131). We can ascertain that bongo flava social media not only caters to a specifically younger, more educated audience, but also is mostly monopolized by larger media entities and songs.

Paying attention to genre provides further insight into the social media post as historical artifact. In utilizing the term "genre," I am referencing a type of oral historiography, where

historians can identify a type of story through paying attention to the "pattern of the tale" in order to categorize it in a larger theoretical framework (White 2000: 6). Luise White's work on oral genre in East Africa informs this focus on pattern, and I find that connecting my analysis with past understandings of oral history grounds it in more substantial theoretical detail. This is in contrast to perhaps defining a social media post through its platform (i.e. a Facebook versus a Twitter post); this type of categorization leaves me on thin ice theoretically, and assumes a rigidity of platform that simply isn't there. Thus, it is more important to pay attention to the pattern of remembering and history making that one can find on Twitter, because one may find similar patterns on different platforms. In the world of social media, these patterns of telling additionally shape the history that is recorded.

*On Hybridity and Localization*

More generally, the dichotomy of globalization and localization has commonly been deployed to understand how African cultures negotiate "local" and "global" influences in their various practices. Understanding bongo flava as a hybrid of African and global idioms, or even a combination of various pre-existing popular music genres, has a precedent in writing about the music culture. This hybrid paradigm has also been the basis for countless monographs about cultural politics, utilizing concepts such as hybridity, resistance, imitation, integration, and other euphemisms for the understanding how cultures (here in this definition, meant to be static, like primary colors) mix. In these definitions there is unfortunately always the specter of cultural hirearchy; embedded in the connotations of "globalization" are processes of capitalism that seek out "lesser" cultures in search of either domination or appropriation. While there do exist hierarchies of cultures at both a worldwide and local level, we as scholars can do better than replicate these hierarchies in our understandings of how cultures interact. The work of Jeremy

Prestholdt can assist with this, as he works to help fracture the narrative around so-called "hybrid" cultures, broadly speaking. In his monograph, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization,* he urges scholars not to forget longstanding "circumstances of interconnectivity," and remember that "humans have historically affected and been affected by others, both far and near," long before the 20th century and often driven by processes outside the limiting idea of globalization (Prestholdt 2008: 1). The rest of the book provides examples of how international trade has forced people for centuries to come to terms with often unfamiliar cultural ideas. Prestholdt's term for this proccess is called "domestication," which he defines as being useful because it describes a proccess of "making familiar or usable, controlling, and bringing into intimate spaces" (Prestholdt: 8). This concept untethers discussions of culture as being "hybrid" or being "localized" to a geographic area because it grounds said terms in a historical context, rendering them almost meaningless. It begs the questions "local to where?" and "global for whom?"; it is in this lens that I aim to understand bongo flava as having domesticated hip hop for its own purposes. Indeed, my own interest in bongo flava music in Tanzania stemmed from a conception that this was a hybrid genre, which operated under the assumption that a cultural practice can take equal parts of two different cultures and combine them, like splicing together two varieties of apples. Again, these rely on static and ahistorical understandings of culture, and if we are seeking to describe how what culture is and how it changes, we cannot work with said understandings as a base point. It becomes imperative to start with a better foundation which will not obscure or silence the dynamic nature of both culture and the way it functions and changes.

Geertz's understanding of culture is a good starting point for this conversation on culture, not because it is a definitive understanding in anthropology but rather because it focuses on the

making and remaking of culture as existing between people. He notes that "cultural acts…are social events like any other"; culture, therefore, is made and remade in social acts, and as social acts are unfixed and dynamic, the culture resulting from said acts must also have the same characteristics (Geertz 1973: 98). I invoke Geertz here to emphasize a paradigm of cultural creation which I believe applies to bongo flava culture and Tanzanian hip hop. In understanding the flow between original iterations of a cultural object and a re-interpretation (or domestication) of said object, we must recognize that both cultural products are dynamic. Even identical cultural products from two different places can be considered to be different if they are socially understood to be different. Thus, if a bongo flava music video utilizes aesthetics from an American popular music counterpart, or if it rips it off entirely, we must still understand this bongo flava counterpart to be new and dynamic, and not simply a hybrid of prefabricated cultural materials.

In understanding how different cultures interact, Prestholdt again provides valuable insight into this matter. He argues that "reflections on globalization…still too commonly assume that until very recently the world was constituted by discrete spheres…whose minimal interactions ensured internal consistencies" (Prestholdt 2008: 3). This mode of thinking overemphasizes historical moments of initial contact between seemingly disparate cultures, and again is ensnared by the static culture concept. In many ways, forgetting that the world has always been an interconnected place falls into what Congolese historian Jacques Depelchin defines as the "syndrome of discovery." He defines it as "an inversion of the meaning of discovery as an act and practice…at the end such a process discovery becomes a cover up" (Depelchin 2005: 3). To assume that the practices of worldwide capitalism from the Global North have been the primary drivers of culture contact is to forget previous "patterns of global

interdependence" that did not include the Global North (Prestholdt 2008: 4). Movement of cultures throughout the globe is caused by a number of forces, many of which are seemingly disparate and unrelated. Prestholdt's concept of "domestication," or the process of making foreign cultural objects "familiar or usable," is a term that I believe more closely approximates the effects of these movements (Prestholdt: 8). This concept not only blurs the line between global and local, but also describes the intimate nature of making aspects of an unfamiliar culture usable in one's own practices.

Utilizing this core concept of domestication, we can critically re-examine ways in which the forces such as colonialism, neo-liberalism, and globalization have been described as influencing local cultures in previous African studies monographs. Notably, V.Y. Mudimbe's discussion on missionary projects in Africa is a good place to start. Specifically, he describes the mission project as being a way to "impose the law of God that he [the missionary] incarnates"; he contrasts this with a theoretical paradigm where the missionary would enter into a dialogue with pagans and 'savages'" (Mudimbe 1988: 47). While this language accurately reflects the violence of missionization against indigenous religious practices, it implies that the widespread success of missionization was one which relied on the domination of indigenous religious. On the contrary, as Mudimbe describes further in the chapter, the embrace of Christianity in Africa relied heavily on "cultural autonomy," and the practice of integrating African indigenous religions with the new model of Christianity (Mudimbe: 71). To me, at least, this describes a practice of domestication, one that most likely was similar to the domestication of Islam into Sub-Saharan cultures centuries prior to these projects.

Similarly, Phyllis Martin's description of time and leisure in Brazzaville could also be theoretically rescued from the quagmire of "colonial resistance" theory and fall under the larger

umbrella of domestication. The book generally outlines the way inhabitants of colonial Brazzaville "created, contested, and occupied their leisure time" (Martin 1996: 3). Martin goes on to argue that the issue of leisure time birthed a "struggle to create a new order of time and space," one which is couched in rhetoric of colonial control and resistance to said control (Martin: 3). For example, she notes that instead of creating time for leisure, inhabitants of rural communities in central Africa often measured time as being "structured around the event rather than the contrary, as in industrialized societies," where time is allotted for certain events (Martin: 4). One does not have to turn the kaleidoscope that much to re-interpret tropes of resistance and domination into domestication in this instance. The former paradigm, along with Martin's interpretation of how time is utilized in "industrialized societies," casts the conflict over leisure time into a struggle of modernity and tradition, or progress and conservatism. A more nuanced way to look at this would be to understand these foreign concepts of time to be intimately integrated into previous understanding of time, and for these new concepts to ultimately serve some indigenous inhabitants of Brazzaville. As Martin notes, "football, fashion, and pop bands had different meanings for different individuals and groups within the town's population," and while some took up their leisure time with social drinking, others "grasped opportunities to incorporate familiar and imported institutions into their urban environment and crate autonomous spheres of cultural activity" (Martin: 7). Again, I do not mean to diminish the violence of the colonial project in Central Africa; rather, I argue that even under oppressive colonial regimes, there were ways in which colonial subjects exercised control power to not only resist their administrators but also re-shape their own cultures.

Laura Fair's monograph *Pastimes and Politics* additionally describes ways of domestication of new colonial regimes in East Africa. Similar to regimes of domesticating

leisure time in Brazzaville, her monograph describes how, when in 1890 Zanzibar became a protectorate of the British empire, former slaves imagined a way to refashion the new society that was now being built. This imagination was made social, and therefore became a culture, through "leisure and popular culture," where politics could be discussed and contested (Fair 2003: 8). An example of this is in how formerly enslaved women dressed at the turn of the century. Notably, former slaves often adopted "elements of free dress that they had…been forbidden from wearing, particularly head coverings and shoes": these public expressions were symbols of "their growing autonomy and economic might" (Fair: 66). In this context, an act as simple as changing one's clothes is in many ways a capsule of Geertz and Prestholdt, where culture as a social act can be utilized to display a domestication of cultural forms. Wearing clothing is a social and public act, and the practice of being seen in clothing can in fact inform and change cultural ideas about a person. Wearing freeborn clothing, then, is to take a newfound status under a colonial regime, and publicly fashion it into something that can change one's culture. The examples cited above describe instances for leisure and popular culture to reshape social interactions in a society, therefore reshaping the society's culture. In many cases, this reshaping can take the form of intimacy with previously foreign elements, whether they be cultural objects or a new societal organization from an outside force. Music is additionally a site where social identity can be negotiated.

*Appealing to the Elder State*

There are significant cultural ties between Kenya and Tanzania that pre date the formation of both countries in their modern forms. In Tanzania, political power has been demonstrated through a performance of elder masculinity, which I argue has persisted from the country's beginnings up until the current president. Theoretically, I draw from the paradigm of

political organization that can be found in Paul Ocobock's monograph *An Uncertain Age*. Ocobock argues that politics in Kenya that was based around authority being directly correlated to age and masculinity. Namely, he notes "In Kenya, statecraft necessitated posing as an elder – producing what I call the elder state" (Ocobock 2017: 4). This paradigm of government authority emerged during the British colonization of the peoples living in Kenya, and notably was a tool for national building post-independence in 1963. Specifically, in postcolonial Kenya, the elder state "ensured that postcolonial politics spun on the axis of age and gender, a gerontocratic form of politics entrenching the power of a single elder generation of male politicians over their young constituents for the next half century" (Ocobock: 5). In local Kenyan communities, age was often a significant marker to differentiate between community members, and often, "elder men laid claim to [the] proccess of making generations as well as norms expected of different ages" (Ocobock: 7). The historical construction of what many scholars have referred to as "youth culture" in East Africa relied on the foil of this consolidation of power from the elder men in communities; this demonstrates how the traditional family can be wielded as an ideological construction that informs both national and domestic politics. Turning back to Tanzania (and with the knowledge that the border between Tanzanian and Kenya is quite porous in terms of cultural practice), I can also identify a similar historical consolidation of political power in the Tanzanian state. For instance, the village centered aspect of the socialist ujamaa experiment in the 1960s and 1970s replicated this consolidation of male power in its insistence of women being relegated to the domestic sphere, while men could enforce the state adminstration in the village as well as in the home (Lal 2017: 4).

Additionally, when the Tanzanian state was first created, it utilized culture to engender a sense of unity and nationalism. Thus, early in the Nyerere administration, any music ngoma was

generally discouraged as being antithetical to nationalistic practices. Within structures of ngoma, there exited "countless varieties distinguished on the basis of ethnicity…region…gender…and function" (Askew 2002: 69). Notably, the name of the practice of female ngoma dance societies was *ngoma ya ndani* (inside dance), which got its title from "its performance practice, namely, having to dance indoors away from male view because of its erotic and sensual dance moves…" (Askew: 73). Thus, we can identify multiple cultural spaces where patriarchy is embedded in the political system that this new Tanzanian state was trying to build. Furthermore, today, the relationship between bongo flava artists and government officials often recreates masculine hierarchies that the elder state relies on. Julius Nyerere, the first president of Tanzania, was often referred to as "*Baba wa Taifa*," or the father of the nation. Since his presidency, the subsequent presidents, all men except for the current one, symbolically took on this role as the nation's father, representing stewardship and stability through masculine archetypes. For example, in multiple bongo flava songs mourning his untimely death, the late president John Magufuli was also referred to as "*baba*," while the new president, Samia Suluhu Hassan, has subsequently earned the title "*mama*," or mother. Even though artists relate to "Mama Samia" differently than they would to a president who is a man, President Hassan is understood as a strong, motherly figure, whose stewardship of the country can be viewed as similar to how mothers all throughout Tanzania manage homes and children. Even today, without a man as president, part of the government's power comes from a belief in the stability of the nuclear family: namely in the understanding that the government's power should be enacted in ways similar to the domestic sphere.

The "elder" portion of the ideology of the elder state was also crucial for the Tanzanian government's administration of its citizens. The ways in which age was wielded as a political

tool can help inform our understanding of the relationship between the Tanzanian state and the music that flourishes within its borders. Youth is an often talked about designation when describing parts of a society, yet it is always a term that evades easy definition. Alex Perullo notes that "in Tanzania, "the term *kijana* means youth in Swahili and technically refers to someone who is between fifteen and thirty-five years of age" and notably is not married or does not have children (Perullo 2011: 33). Not only is this a significantly large age bracket but also it connotes that the definition of kijana is defined not by itself but by an absence of traditional markers of adulthood. Youth has also been a place of contestation of the status quo in East Africa. Ocobock notes that under the colonial adminstration in Kenya, alternative paradigms about age were introduced; this gave young people "new sources of wealth and authority" in their communities, and also provided the basis for a theoretical questioning of the gerontocracy that had previously ruled their lives" (Ocobock 2017: 9). In both cultural practice and the accumulation of capital, youth has historically represented alternative ontologies that challenge the status quo. It is no surprise, then, that the emergence of the young, political music genre of bongo flava came with an effort by the Tanzanian state to co-opt its dynamic energy.

**Methodology**

The data conducted for this dissertation was gathered through ethnography and musical analysis. The latter methodology is informed by my training as an ethnomusicologist as well as my language study. Crucial to my work is being able to provide interpretations of a song's content and musical language, often only based on hearing the song. Ethnographic research, broadly speaking, was exceedingly helpful in researching the ways in which this music connects with the broader scope of Tanzanian politics and understandings of nationalism. Both my virtual ethnography, conducted intermittently between 2021 and 2023, as well as a three month in-

person fieldwork trip in 2022, contributed to my overall findings. In the virtual ethnographic space, archive studies primarily informed my research methodology, but I was also able to conduct preliminary interviews with a few rappers who were willing to use WhatsApp as a medium for asking and answering questions. My materials gathered from my virtual ethnography include dozens of screengrabs and recordings from various social media events, as well as transcriptions of Whatsapp interviews.

I consider social media as an archive of bongo flava music, which is why I spent much of my virtual ethnography collecting materials from social media. There is much already written on physical archives that underpins my work. For example, Sylvia Nannoyonga-Tamasuza's work on constructing the "popular" in Ugandan music archives addresses questions of access and the role of the archivist / archive in constructing what is remembered. She notes that "the archiving of music in Uganda is left to the private sphere, to the personal collections of individuals and a few private organizations" (Nannyonga-Tamasuza 2006: 35). This is not to say that archives are better off in the hands of the state, but rather to call attention to constantly understanding the archive as shaping the events that are remembered. She also cites a more important comment on the construction of archives from Manoff, which reads "An archive should be viewed as a reconstruction – a recording of history from a particular perspective; it cannot provide transparent access of the events themselves" (Nannyonga-Tamasuza: 34). In the context of social media, this is an especially important aspect to remember, because social media often creates realistic facsimiles of life.

Alongside archival studies, however, historiography related to oral history provides deeper insight into my ethnography on social media. Notably, Neil Kodesh's work on oral history and genre greatly informs my analysis of social media as archive. Kodesh notes that

among other important developments in understanding how oral histories create truth, "…sensitivity towards genre…and the attention to the significance of site of recollection…enhance the analysis of oral sources" (Kodesh 2007: 530). In this instance, he is citing the significance of the physical sites of recollection that may determine what is remembered and what is forgotten. Additionally, he cites the genre of oral history as being crucial for the information that is being recounted. Transposing these ideas on social media provides deeper insight into how social media posts remember history. First, the ways in which most Tanzanians access social media is through their cell phone, not through a personal computer. Achille Mbembe notes that the introduction of the mobile phone to the African continent "has changed the way people speak, act and write, communicate, imagine what they are and how they relate to themselves, to others, and to the world at large (Mbembe 2017). Thus, the importance of the mobile phone in shaping how Tanzanians understand their own identities cannot be overstated; this, in turn, dictates how community members create and record historical record through their phones. Even the physical hardware of a phone, with an emphasis on media and a long vertical screen optimized for a certain type of writing and reading, has significant effects on what is remembered and what is forgotten on social media. The space in which these histories are made needs to be constantly considered.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant factor in pushing my work towards the virtual sphere, but even outside of extenuating circumstances, my research is incomplete without an analysis of how both genres I discuss in this thesis exist on social media. For the portion of my fieldwork that is virtual, I view this research as being grounded in the practice of "netnography," where the virtual spaces I inhabit make up the field. This requires a few specific practical skills. Firstly, I am comfortable in navigating the patterns of bongo flava social media,

which requires both significant language skill past formal Swahili (as one must also be able to understand the language abbreviated and altered online) and the genres that various actors post in. These genres may be determined by platform but can also be determined by the type of user or even the time of day the post is created. Like any other fieldwork site, it is crucial to adapt to the natural patterns of the public space. Also, doing work on social media considers these online spaces as publics. The term, publics, is not equivalent to Habermas' public sphere, and has been relentlessly theorized as a place of political action, participatory democracy, and even radical resistance. The definition I hold on to as being true for *all* publics, however, comes from Michael Warner, who, as I stated before, argues that "a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of a discourse" (Warner 2010: 90). On social media, a public space does not exist unless there is discourse that is not only created by users but also discussed, altered, shared, and forgotten by other users. Lanerolle notes that one such way to create a public is through the use of #hashtags, which "enables users to create an idea, to contribute to the curation of ideas and to construct or grow the public for that idea" (Lanerolle 2020: 95). The understanding of social media as both an archive of oral history as well as a public that creates and remakes discourse means I often had to read both the public space to understand what is important for my own understanding and discourse as well as interpret what others have decided to retell and inscribe on social media.

I initially began fieldwork that would eventually turn into this dissertation in 2018. I regard this first foray to East Africa as a significant learning experience for me as a researcher. It was always somewhat difficult to secure interviews in the short two months I was there, and I only had the ability to speak basic Swahili after taking elementary courses on the language at UCLA. However, I found that in the early days of my stay in Dar es Salaam, I could reliably

count on taxi drivers to speak with me about nearly anything. This was mostly due to an obligation of hospitality that most taxi drivers follow, but whenever I spoke about music in Tanzania, they usually offered their opinions on the matter. It was a cab driver who first introduced me to the term "*kizazi kipya,*" which literally translates to "the new generation," but more idiomatically represents youth culture in various Tanzanian urban centers. Some locals claim that *kizazi kipya* is also a term for the popular music of Tanzania. This is instead of the term "bongo flava," which has deep ties to Dar es Salaam specifically, and obscured the diversity of popular music emerging from other parts of Tanzania. Regardless of this debate on definitions, it was made clear to me early on that so much of bongo flava centers around conceptions of youth in Tanzania. Bongo flava's being understood as youth culture in Tanzania is one of the primary reasons why it has been understood as a tool for a young, disenfranchised citizens to voice their views on their community. This same connection to young people is why the Tanzanian government has partnered so closely with the music's major artists to secure votes.

My second trip to Tanzania was conducted in during a three-month period in 2022. Before my trip, I made significant connections with a few key interlocutors through various social media apps, initially to make introductions in places like Instagram and Clubhouse, and then eventually to gain WhatsApp numbers to further introduce myself to folks who I would eventually meet in person. My main interlocutor and collaborator on my ethnographic research, a rapper who goes by Nash MC, was instrumental in providing contacts for interviews with various underground rappers throughout Tanzania. Nash was one of the main planners of a project called *Sanaa Kwa Manufaa*, or "Cypher for the Future." This project sought to equip local rappers with a knowledge of hip hop's history in Tanzania and useful professional

development skills to make it as an independent artist, from understanding sales of music on apps like Whatsapp to proper etiquette when recording and performing for fans. These seminars happened in-person, so for the first month or so of my time in Tanzania, I traveled to six distinct reigons[3] of Tanzania to sit in on these seminars, take notes, and interview rappers. As I conducted more interviews, and posted evidence of me partaking in these seminars on social media, I was able to secure more contacts through word of mouth, or individual referral, or sometimes through direct message on Instagram. The latter portion of my ethnography had me travel to two additional cities, Mwanza and Arusha, to conduct more interviews secured through the above methods. In total, I conducted forty-four interviews with forty-eight individuals who were associated with the Tanzanian underground hip hop scene. Most of my interviewees were rappers, but a few positioned themselves as either mentors to aspiring artists, producers of rap songs, or in one notable case, a hip hop scholar (Gego Master), who has written his own book in Swahili about Tanzanian hip hop.

My presence at the *Sanaa Kwa Manufaa* seminars was explained quite honestly; I was a graduate student conducting research on hip hop and bongo flava, and wanted to ask artists questions about their work and their opinions on the focus of my own dissertation. I sometimes had to dispel the notion that I had any kind of foothold or clout in the music business, either in Tanzania or the United States, and on a few occasions, I had to politely decline proposals for me to get one's music played on terrestrial radio. From the start, I have avoided positioning myself as creating any kind of musical content on this space, eschewing the traditional but still utilized idea of bi-musicality as a way to conduct participant-observer ethnography. In many ways, I leaned into my position as an outsider only because I was never going to be someone who could

[3] These include the cities of Iringa, Mbeya, Mtwara, Bagamoyo, Dar es Salaam, and Stone Town.

ever be considered an insider in this community. However, this outsider status which I self-selected create some of the notions about who I was which I wanted to dispel. My status as a white American who spoke Swahili was primarily responsible for the idea that I was somehow connected to a larger organization who could invest in individual artists. This is because more often than not, white Americans in Tanzania are a part of NGOs or other similar organizations who have the resources to invest in the arts. Ultimately, my goal was and still is to take down the thoughts and ideas of my interlocutors as accurately as possible, and then interpret this culture, more broadly, to English-speaking academics. I speak only for my interviewees; I do not, and never will, be able to speak for the culture as a whole.

**Chapter Outline**

In this introduction, I open with the general argument of my dissertation, and then provide an overview in relevant literature and theory regarding interactions between popular music, the state, social media, and masculinity. A significant portion of this chapter is a literature review that will tie together primary and secondary historical sources that have been useful for my research. These include sources that have referenced bongo flava or Tanzanian popular music, masculinity as it relates to politics in Africa, African cultural politics broadly, digital archiving, and conceptions of the public sphere. I additionally provide an explanation of my methodologies used for this dissertation, including how I approach digital ethnography, and the circumstances surrounding my in-person ethnography. I then end with a breakdown of my chapters that will contribute to my overall argument.

In my second chapter, I would like to retell the history of the development of bongo flava, from its earliest iterations until today. This chapter serves to not only orient the reader, but also incorporate certain theoretical underpinnings into the narrative of bongo flava. Utilizing

primary and secondary sources, I aim to untangle the somewhat thorny question of whether or not bongo flava and Tanzanian hip hop are synonymous, and what conditions caused the intersections of the two genres. I then historicize bongo flava in a greater history of popular musics and politicized leisure time in Tanzania. In chapter three, I unpack a common refrain about politics that was told to me during my fieldwork trip in 2022. Politics, for many underground rappers, is not just insignificant in the world of hip hop; rather, the two articulate incompatible versions of reality. Here, I seek to describe the differences of how the Tanzanian state depicts life in the country, and how rappers in Tanzania aim to articulate a different version of daily life. Initially, I provide an overview of the *ujamaa* period, specifically in how the programs enacted by then-president Julius Nyerere created an idealized version of Tanzania, in contrast to many folks' lived experience of this time. I then explore the variety of reasons in which the underground hip hop culture in Tanzania is disillusioned with "politics," which to many of my interviewees, describes the machinations of an out of touch government. I additionally supplement this exploration with a lyrical analysis of two songs by Nash MC.

Next, I aim to describe how the Tanzanian state utilizes the online culture of bongo flava. Throughout the chapter, I outline how the online discourse of information surrounding bongo flava pop stars can be considered both a public and an archive for the genre. Sites like Instagram and Twitter provide one of the only real places to find granular information for what has happened in the genre. Even individual posts, where fans can comment and discuss what has been posted, can be understood as a miniature public. I then track the ways in which the government has interjected itself into the world of bongo flava, utilizing song lyrics, music videos, and social media posts to analyze the very public alliance that the Tanzanian state has formed with the genre's biggest stars. Ultimately, I question the abilities of social media to be

politically emancipatory in this case, and outline how a genre, which used to be transgressive towards the government, is effectively one of its major cultural outreach programs. In my final body chapter, I align my previous chapters to articulate how a performance of certain types of masculinity is required for political power in Tanzania. Here, I draw heavily on the theory of the "elder state" to describe how the gerontocratic rule of colonial and post-colonial Kenya has an analogous counterpart in Tanzania. I look at music videos and statements made by politicians and musicians alike to determine how both the popular music of Tanzania and its government articulate ideal performances of masculinity. Being the "ideal man," so to speak, has specific aesthetic and embodied aspects, and many of these aspects are articulated in the ways rappers and pop stars talk about what is required to be successful in the music business. I end this chapter with accounts of three women navigating the world of Tanzanian hip hop, and the specific difficulties they have faced as individuals.

In my concluding chapter, I will briefly summarize the arguments made in my body chapters, and then discuss the major contributions of this work. This chapter will touch on the history of bongo flava I have written as well as its life on social media. It will additionally describe the ways Tanzanian rappers understand politics, and how, regardless of one's definition of politics, power in these worlds is partially shaped by performances of masculinity. Ultimately, I argue that a goal of bongo flava artists, Tanzanian rappers, and the Tanzanian state is the authority and power to represent Tanzania as each party understands it.

## Chapter II:

## Historicizing Bongo Flava

### Introduction

It was extremely interesting to conduct research on bongo flava in 2020, which was both an election year in the United States and in Tanzania. As someone who was invested in the politics of both nations, I was able to have a near-constant stream of news and information via social media for a few months leading up to the election days. Because of the nine-hour time difference, I would scroll Tanzanian Twitter and Instagram during my evenings and early mornings to catch up on the day's news, before switching to American social media during the workday. It was easy to make comparisons between the two elections. While popular musicians often take political stances in the United States, historically there is a general sense of separation of music and electioneering – Jay Z's embrace of Barack Obama in 2008 was hardly a unilateral embrace of the candidate from the entire hip hop community and felt more like an individual choice. In 2020, however, the ruling party (Chama Cha Mapinduzi, or CCM) had a monopoly on bongo flava. Almost every week, the country's biggest stars would come out with a Facebook post or new song singing the praises of John Magufuli, the candidate running for CCM at the time. These were complete with album covers emblazoned with party's signature green and yellow colors, and lyrics promising new heights for the country previously unattained in the event of Magufuli's success. To me, this was a strange lining-up of all pop stars in the country around a single candidate. For Tanzanians, this was, as Jay-Z once said, politics as usual.

The embrace of a CCM candidate by the country's top pop stars has a significant historical precedent in Tanzania, even before there were multi-party elections, or Tanzania was even a country. In this area of the world, popular music has rarely, if ever, been left out of the

political arena. Bongo flava is a music world, an entrepreneurial pathway, and, more recently, a political tool for the government. It can be connected to attitudes of self-reliance and hard work that were developed under Nyerere during the ujamaa period. Self-reliance, in particular, was both a geopolitical attitude of the government under Nyerere as well as a motto for navigating the shortcomings of his government for regular citizens. Bongo flava can also be understood as a way of hustling in the 1980s, during which economic conditions in Tanzanian cities became precarious, and one had to do whatever one could to survive. This specific attitude of hustling lives on in Tanzanian hip hop culture today, and will be explored in the following chapter. Finally, bongo flava today is a flashy representation of Tanzanian success, which is crucial for the government's ability to show its connection to young people. In understanding how bongo flava became so many things, it is important to first describe the relationship bongo flava has to the tradition of Tanzanian hip hop, and how the split between the two emerged (or perhaps always was there).[4]

**A Historical Narrative of Bongo Flava**

The following narrative will provide an overview on the origins of bongo flava and Tanzanian hip hop, in order to accurately account for why they occupy disparate cultural spaces today. While the name "bongo flava" is contestable, historically specific, and often accompanied by potentially apocryphal stories of its origins, hip hop in Tanzania has been an established culture since the early 1980s. It was originally an arts movement practiced by young upper-middle class residents of posh neighborhoods of Dar es Salaam, such as Oyster Bay or Masaki.[5] These young people had the financial means to acquire hip hop LPs from abroad and would learn

[4] A table outlining the differences between the two musical cultures can be found in Appendix B.
[5] Today, these neighborhoods primarily are the locations of upscale restaurants and homes of ex-patriots and employees for various non-government organizations (NGOs).

how to rap by copying the flows and rhyme schemes they would hear on said LPs. At this point in the history of Tanzanian hip hop, all lyrics were in English, and even the early competitions saw many rappers performing exact imitations of English language songs, believing that this was "the best way to perform rap music and, as a result, win [a] competition" (Perullo 2007: 257). However, from these early imitations, rappers slowly learned how to utilize a more familiar language, Swahili, in their art forms. With the knowledge of flow and rhyme acquired from learning English language rap, local youths in Dar es Salaam took American instrumentals and started composing Swahili lines over them. Nikki Mbishi, a prominent rapper in Tanzania today, was making music during this early period, and elaborates further on this process: "Kwa hiyo then we grow up and [take] the beats from Vanilla Ice…LL Cool J, [and] we tried to put the same same vibe; the same same pattern from the previous song on the new one, but this [new] one, we sing in Swahili. So, I can be the Swahili LL Cool J, the Swahili Vanilla Ice (Nikki Mbishi, interview by author, Dar es Salaam, April 21, 2022). Many point to rapper Saleh Ajabry as being the first person to learn how to rap completely in Swahili, over the instrumental for "Ice Ice Baby" by Vanilla Ice. He recorded the track in 1991, and a friend took the recording and sold it to distributors throughout the city; shortly after, "Ajabry's name gained recognition in Dar es Salaam" (Perullo 2007: 257).

Like many global hip hop scenes that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, the development of rapping in a local language was significant in creating a distinct identity for Tanzanian hip hop. I hesitate to call this practice "localization" because the binaries created by that term do not sufficiently provide an accurate representation of hip hop in Tanzania. However, it was in this early stage of hip hop in Tanzania where potentially the initial split of bongo flava and hip hop occurred. Scholars and rappers alike point to the Yo! Rap Bonanza in the early 1990s as being

the first major competition for hip hop, and a signal that rap had taken hold in Dar es Salaam. It was at this event that Saleh Ajabry first made a name for himself. After the success of this event, there remained a question as to where hip hop would go from there, and at the time "there were at least two conceptions of what hip hop should be" (Perullo 2007: 261). On one side, there were artists such as Dar es Salaam's Hardblasters or Arusha's Kwanza Unit, who believed in hip hop as a voice for the younger generation, and who generally tried to keep hip hop closer to what they believed to be the American version of it. On the other side was a group of young people who saw it as an enterprising opportunity, and were "less concerned about the maintenance of a hip hop mission" (Perullo 2007: 261). Regardless of which direction young people took it, hip hop continued to be an attractive pathway for young people throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In a conversation with rapper K wa Mapacha, who started his career in 2000, he mentions this exact point, saying "kwanza kabisa unajua sisi tulikuwa tuna tunapenda kurap kutokana na ulikuwa ndio utamaduni mpya kuimgia Tanzania." [*First of all, you know we used to love to rap because it was the new culture to enter Tanzania*] (K wa Mapacha, interview by author, Dar es Salaam, April 21, 2022). For him, hip hop was a novel hobby that he and his friends could do and create art with. However, he was always interested in this becoming a potential career for him. Specifically, he notes that "Tukaona kumbe inawezekana kufanya hivi kwa kisawahili…Lakini hapo tulikuwa hatujajua kama ni biashara" [*We saw that it is possible to do this in Swahili…but then, we didn't know if it was like a business*] (K wa Mapacha, 2022). A tenuous relationship to money and income remains for most rappers today who are not lucky enough to be one of the few bongo flava stars, but it bears mentioning that these artists, this music is always made with the intention to earn money, even if they do not enjoy significant financial success.

As previously stated, the development of rapping in Swahili was crucial for creating a local music that could be understood as a product of Tanzania. Developing a rapping style in Swahili added an additional specificity of place to the music. A significant appeal of hip hop for young Tanzanians was the platform and voice it carried with it – as previously mentioned, many artists understood the music to be socially significant, financially lucrative, or some combination of both. The move towards Swahili rapping opened up the genre to be made by less educated members of society (i.e. those who had not learned English in school); this shift immensely democratized the creation of this music and greatly increased its audience. From this point in its development, hip hop then began to address local issues that were relevant to this new audience of Swahili speaking listeners. This turn from rap being mainly competitive to becoming more of a socially conscious music happened for a couple of reasons. For those who understood hip hop as a mouthpiece for the disenfranchised in Tanzania, this was the natural development of the genre once artists figured out how to rap in Swahili. However, for artists looking to make money with this music, it's been suggested that they too rapped about local issues in order for their music to be relevant to a large number of fans. Thus began the tenuous relationship that hip hop, and eventually bongo flava, had with the politics of Tanzania.

Bongo flava, regardless of its sonic aspects, has always had a relationship with the current cultural trends in Tanzania. Gego Master, a hip hop MC and thinker, argues that the period between 1990 and 2002 in Dar es Salaam was when Tanzanian hip hop received the most significant radio play. This was perhaps the closest the musical worlds of bongo flava and hip hop was, because the two genres were basically synonymous, and hip hop was the new, current thing in Tanzania. Gego notes that during this time, "…hip hop iilikuwa aina ya kuwa sasa kwa Tanzania, na inapigwa kwenye kila redio. Yaani, redio ilikuwa na muziki wote. Wao wanaitwa

kizazi kipya unapigwa redio aguo wa hip hop" [*Hip hop was the current thing in Tanzania, and it was played on every radio station. That is, the radio had all the music. They were called the new generation of hip hop*] (Gego Master & Lugombo Makanta, interview with author, Dar es Salaam, March 28, 2022). During this time, the business of hip hop also grew enormously, notably through terrestrial radio being the gatekeepers of this emerging music. Radio presenters were often the ones handsomely compensated for playing songs on the radio, and since hip hop enjoyed such significant popularity, the price for an emerging artist could be expensive. Perullo notes that "according to several deejays, some of these fees [were]…upward of Tsh 100,000 (US$100) for moderate airplay over a one-month period on one radio show" (Perullo 2011: 234). Most of the artists who I interviewed could never afford this cost, and so without a substantial benefactor or a particularly good sense of business acumen and hustle, this kind of publicity, on the radio specifically, is unprecedented for an independent hip hop artist.

Thus, as radio presenter's tastes began to move towards different aesthetics, hip hop and bongo flava began to split into two distinct genres. It is hard to determine when, specifically, the two genres were fully apart; conversely, as previously mentioned, there are disagreements as to whether or not bongo flava could ever be hip hop. Even today, purists and pragmatic artists alike disagree on how much an artist making hip hop or hip hop influenced music should cater to music business sensibilities. Nash MC, an artist from Dar es Salaam, is critical of media and its role in influencing the public, and so generally is avoidant of interviews or any kind of media that isn't his own Instagram or Facebook. Fivara, another well-known artist from Mwanza, is similarly self-supported with his own social media being focused on his career. However, he is a bit more open to working with traditional avenues of music media in Tanzania in order to further advance himself professionally. These artists can have these opinions largely due to social

media, which provided a never-before-seen level of access and exposure for independent artists. Social media is not an egalitarian space, and the same media houses that ran radio play can outperform independent artists online. However, the ability to market and sell one's music exclusively through digital means was life changing for many artists who previously would have to utilize personal networks and on-the-ground sales of USB flash sticks and CDs in order to sell their albums. Like radio, social media has been revolutionary for the Tanzanian music business and continues to empower independent artists today in their respective careers.

**Historical Precedents**

Bongo flava, as a historical form of hip hop, as its current genre iteration as popular music, and as a guiding ethos for Tanzanian hip hop, is inextricably tied to Tanzanian politics. Tanzanian hip hop today, as an avenue for political and social commentary, follows a longer history of music addressing social issues. There is significant evidence for the argument that hip hop's acceptance, as well as its aesthetic integration into popular music in Tanzania, was due to cultural and musical precursors to the musical genre. Fernando Orejuela theorizes that specific cultures worldwide can be more germane for the development of a local hip hop genre if they already contain certain musical aspects, including "complex rhythmic constructions" and a tendency "to value oral narrative and nonlinguistic musical features" (Orejuela 2021: 204). Furthermore, he notes that hip hop's acceptance worldwide has been in part due to the musical culture being "the roadmap for youth around the world to navigate possible pathways for musical innovations to express sociopolitical concerns and the everyday lives they lead" (Orejuela: 203-204). In understanding the local context of a genre that globally is understood to be politically minded, it is useful to understand how previous genres in Tanzania dealt with the often-tricky issue of discussing politics in music.

Taarab music predates Tanzania as a modern country, but is a useful starting point in cataloging the history of how popular music and politics have interacted in the area. Laura Topp Fargion argues that taraab[6] music in Zanzibar was often the site of interpersonal relation and conflict – a precursor to the politically aware nature of Tanzanian hip hop. As previously noted, Taraab has been a part of the musical worlds of many urban centers on the Swahili coast for centuries, and the specific iteration in Zanzibar which became popular in Tanzania is generally agreed to have been introduced "by the third Omani sultan, Sultan Barghash bin Said, in the mid-1870s" (Topp Fargion 1993: 113). The ensembles were historically separated by gender, and often included instruments such as the *quanun* (a plucked zither), *oud* (a fretless plucked lute), and a *riqq* (a small handheld frame drum similar to the American tambourine). The history of taraab in Tanzania for many begins with the contributions of Siti binti Saad, who for many in Zanzibar was the "mother of taarab" (Topp Fargion: 116). Similar to the groundbreaking Swahili rap of Saleh Ajabry, Siti binti Saad was one of the first women to sing *taarab* music in Swahili, and sang about issues and problems in everyday life. This is in contrast to the more common themes of romantic love found in taarab's more common form as a "male, upper-class Arab performance genre" (Topp Fargion: 116). Kelly Askew rightly attributes a defining characteristic of *taraab* to be "the heavy use of metaphor, innuendo, allusion, and double entendre" (Askew 2002: 126). In the Swahili version of taraab, these literary strategies would be utilized in order to discretely comment on relationships amongst friends, colleagues, and enemies, and would allow the singer to maintain social order while expressing themselves. Sometimes, societal issues would also seep into these lyrics, but never explicitly like bongo flava. In the late 1990s, the

[6] *Taarab* was originally Egyptian court music which was governed by Arabic musical principles such as the *maqam* modal system. The culture of Swahili *taarab* is related to Arabic *tarab*, which can mean more literally a state of muscial ecstasy or more generally refer to styles of secular art music made in urban centers in the Near East.

music also came to represent Tanzanian national pride; the Tanzanian government's embrace of this music also indicated an embrace of Swahili identity, which had previously been shunned from the national zeitgeist for being too cosmopolitan. Under outside control as well as during the emergence of a new nation, music has always been utilized to inform a larger cultural identity in Tanzania.

Another historical precedent is muziki wa dansi, which can be described as Tanzanian rhumba music, heavily influenced by Congolese immigrants emigrating to places like Dar es Salaam as early as the 1930s. The music shares many idioms with Congolese *soukous* but is distinct through it being sung in Swahili, as well as smaller stylistic differences reflecting the artists creating this music. Often, cities like Dar es Salaam would be the setting for dansi songs about love, money, friendships, and heartbreak; all songs, however, included extended sections of guitar vamping around a repeated line, called the *sebene* in soukous. These sections allow audience members to get up and dance, and soloists to demonstrate their virtuosity, usually on electric guitar. Before Tanzanian independence from the British government in 1961, it offered "a cultural route to social parity with colonizers for Tanganyikans and Zanzibaris making a determined bid for independence" (Askew 2002: 275). Namely, the music's tonal center (as it is ultimately a recreation of Afro-Cuban rhumba in Africa), along with its use of instruments from the global north, meant that it was music popular with locals and colonizers alike. After Tanzanian independence, *dansi* bands continued to address issues in Tanzanian society, but offered few critiques against the state, as government organizations were often their primary sponsors. For example, one of the more notable *dansi* bands today, DDC Mlimani Park Orchestra, references its prior funding by the Dar es Salaam Development Corporation in its name (DDC). This reluctance to name specific government actors, and instead discuss the

problems they may be responsible for solving, is a common thread for a lot of Tanzanian popular music. Hip hop's naming of specific actors in politics, thus, was a distinct (and perhaps welcomed) departure from its musical predecessors' discussion of politics.

Outside of the popular music sphere, we have ngoma, or "pre-colonial" reconstructions of indigenous music practice, as another precedent to bongo flava's political implications. Ngoma was propagated by the Tanzanian state for most of the 60s and 70s as representing authentic and "true" Tanzanian music. This embrace of ngoma was part of the Ujamaa project under Julius Nyerere. Ujamaa was arguably one of the most ambitious forms of African socialism that came about during the latter half of the twentieth century and was "an agriculture-based re-invention of communalism painted with shades of an idealized African past" (Askew: 47). Priya Lal notes that looking back, "it is tempting to reduce the ujamaa experiment to a quixotic scheme…at best, or to dismiss it as one of the many examples of state authoritarianism confirming the generalized dysfunction of postcolonial Africa politics, at worst" (Lal 2017: 4). To return to ngoma; the music was highlighted in the Nyerere regime because it, like the rest of ujamaa, relied on a re-creation of the idealized African past. The focus on remaking the village, for instance, was an example of this as an ideal of collectivism and cooperation, as well as a way to encourage "deculturated city dwellers to return to rural communities so as to restore meaning and morality to their lives…" (Lal: 8). While the village model had quite a few ideological precedents in previous socialist projects, ujamaa's embrace of re-making the past was a stark break from Maoist and Leninist socialist projects; while Mao and Lenin did not find anything "worth emulating or worth preserving from their respective cultural pasts," Nyerere's vision of the way forward embraced that past as a blueprint for a new society (Askew 2002: 159). This embracing of the past was intended to engender a unified Tanzania, and musicians, while often thought of in

Tanzania as educators or teachers of society, were recruited to help with this task. Even today, some have indicated there is an inherent difficulty in challenging societal norms and customs. Emmanuel Ndale, the Artistic Director at the Cultural Arts Center at Tumaini University in Arusha, Tanzania, noted to me that it is "hard to challenge the authorities, or even to challenge society," due to long held traditions of upholding societal norms in Tanzanian spaces (Emmanuel Ndale, personal communication, October 19, 2021). This sentiment additionally makes the work of someone like Professor Jay, a current member of Tanzanian parliament and rapper, so significant, in that he can challenge pre-existing societal values.[7] So, while Tanzanian hip hop's original political consciousness may have been influenced by the inherent anti-authoritarian attitude of hip hop globally, the practice of using music to address politics, either personal or in the government, has a long history in the area.

**Expanding the Definition of Bongo Flava**

Numerous musical precedents exist in the space within which bongo flava currently operates in Tanzania. Even the earlier versions of bongo flava, as strictly socially conscious hip hop, can be considered a precedent for what the term and music mean today. Bongo flava being mostly understood as a form of popular music in Tanzania today doesn't mean the attitudes of creating change through music have vacated the country. Rather, they have simply been carried on through the practice and tradition of Tanzanian hip hop. Mwenda Ntarangwi, writes that hip hop is a "forum through which East African youth, often left out of important socioeconomic and political commentaries and decision-making processes, attain agency (Ntarangwi 2009: 3). To

[7] Joseph Mbilinyi, or "Mr II.," is a rapper turned politician who also is a member of Tanzanian's parliament. He was jailed in 2018 for allegedly defaming Magufuli at a rally, and in response to his 73-day jailtime, released a song, called #219, outlining the authoritarian nature of the government's response to him. The name is in reference to his prisoner number while in jail. The song was popular amongst his supporters, but BASATA, the Tanzanian arts authority, subsequently banned it from radio after its release due to fears of inciting public violence.

me, this quote summarizes the political implications of hip hop in its early days in Tanzania, and why the government needed to negotiate said implications. While the genre was concerned with describing issues such as inequality and poverty that existed for all Tanzanians, the implication of hip hop being a youth-focused genre, along with the paradigm of the youth being opposed to elder state, couched the raising of these issues as being integral in youth culture in Tanzania. In some respects, the explicit naming of these issues (which did not shy away from naming those in charge as being responsible for them) was possibly due to the state's embrace of neoliberalism. While the state in post socialist Tanzania continued "shaping the content of radio broadcasts and popular music," the neoliberal encouragement of the individual to provide for themselves meant that musicians relied less on outside government organizations for patronage, as had been the case before Tanzanian neoliberal reforms (Perullo 2011: 14). For the Tanzanian state, this meant that they could no longer completely control the media in their country.

As hip hop became more popular in the 1990s, and gained the title of bongo flava, artists began to make music that had more melodic elements, content that was less critical of the government, and was generally more palatable to the public. There are a number of reasons for this shift but notably a significant one was the continued desire to become a full-time musician by many rappers who had previously been making rap music. In order to be popular, the sound had to appeal to more members of Tanzanian society than a limited group of young people. This new, lighter music did indeed become more popular, and media houses capitalized on this popularity with radio plays and financial support of artists who they decided to back. It was during these years that pop bongo flava artists were given significant financial support that the genre began to splinter in terms of its sonic characteristics and relationship to the state. In the

eyes of the government, this was the perfect time to reward these new pop artists for their apolitical musical products, and begin to build ties with the young people of their country.

For example, in the 2005 national elections, hip hop and bongo flava were still somewhat related in sonic characteristics. Artists making rap music during these elections, however, backed a number of different political causes, ranging from critical to outright supportive of the political ruling class. Rapper Mr. II came out with his song *"kura yangu"* (my vote), which made clear that voting should be taken seriously, and not thrown away on surface aesthetics. Additionally, other artists such as TMK Wanaume rapped in direct support of a specific party, in this case for candidate Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete (running with Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM), the original political party in Tanzania. Their song in support of Kikwete was called "*anafaa"* (he fits) and discusses how this candidate is the proper man for the lofty job of president. In her analysis of the 2005 elections, Reuster-Jahn contends that the artists who sided with Kikwete helped accomplish two major goals of the genre. She writes, "On the one hand they provided the youth with a medium to make their voices heard – their complaints, their criticism, their life experience, their problems, their needs and their desires. On the other hand, they viewed bongo flava music as a way to achieve a better life and recognition for themselves" (Reuster-Jahn 2008: 67). Here, she outlines the central issue facing artists who want to make music for a living in Tanzania. If one wants to participate in the hip hop tradition of becoming a mouthpiece for the youth, they diminish their chances of making a decent living from music. Making bongo flava, in many ways, is a political choice as well as an economic one: a recognition that it is not discordant with the original ideals of Tanzanian hip hop to scrape out a living through any means possible. Out of necessity, then, even the most radically minded

rappers need to negotiate the reality that the music business is indeed a business, and the art one makes, to a degree, must be attractive to listeners and potential buyers.

The genre of bongo flava has been a similar site of social negotiation and political activity. As hip hop in Tanzania developed as a genre that contained "foreign" elements, scholars have often utilized terms like hybridity or imitation to describe the initial years of the music's existence. Mwenda Ntarangwi describes youth in East Africa as "mobilizing" the genre of hip hop to "produce…new avenues for identity formation," and critique of society, which isn't incorrect, but arguably views hip hop as a static template upon which the youth have placed their own input (Ntarangwi 2009: 15). Alex Perullo notes that the eventual genre of bongo flava follows a historical pattern of "imitation of foreign music," which has been "central to the formation of several Tanzanian popular music genres" (Perullo 2012: 188). Notably, however, he additionally is unhappy with hybridity theories that describe the development of music genres, and utilizes the term "innovation," to describe the ways "artists alter the sounds, uses, and interpretations of music" (Perullo 2012: 189). The study of bongo flava, even as it has transformed into a popular music genre as of the last two decades, has been rooted in understandings of hybridity and synchronization. But taking a closer look at the music, and the processes of creating music that articulated a specific political consciousness of the youth, these terms do not do enough justice to describe what the music is, and what it represented.

More specifically, I think the language utilized in describing the development of culture deeply matters in its specificity. Hip hop in Tanzania, in its original incarnation, was a rethinking of how society would understand issues of the common person, especially younger people who flocked to the genre as a mouthpiece for their struggles. The explicitness of naming political corruption and local issues within Tanzania made the genre extremely popular because it not

only identified societal problems but also named the society that youth wished to live in. The naming of these issues in the national language, Swahili, provided significant credence to these imagined realities. In the context of language being tied to political efficacy, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o argues that "…a study of our own languages is important for a meaningful self-image" (Thiong'o 1986: 73). Both the language of the Tanzanian nation, as well as content focused towards the future constructed by the youth makes Tanzanian hip hop highly effective for constructing identity. Additionally, as the genre came about during Tanzania's adoption of neoliberalism as a country-wide economic model (in contrast to former support of the arts being primarily from the state), the genre was also seen as an economic means to get to the society that it outlines in its music. The nature of hip hop's political activism and comparatively sparse melodic content meant that the genre had a predisposition for speaking truth to power, even divorced from its political context in the United States. However, these musicians developed a rapping style that was domesticated to their community and a political outlook that could only exist within urban centers in Tanzania. Additionally, even the inference that hip hop flourishing outside of its Western context is an example of hybridity or even irony "reveals the desire of Westerners to assume a cultural and material tradition entirely distinct from (and superior to) the rest of the world" (Prestholdt 2008: 170). Thus, even though Tanzanians do not live under the same racial or class dynamics as Americans, the former community can make hip hop with the same virtuosity and political importance as their American counterparts. Domestication, then, is a fitting term to the way youth in Tanzania have created bongo flava from hip hop culture.

Virtually everywhere, at any point in history, members of various communities "relentlessly incorporate seemingly conflicting ideas and forces" (Prestholdt: 2). Keeping this in mind, when we review the ways that scholars have understood contact between "global" and

"local" cultural forces, there exists a difficulty in delineating between the two outside the furthest margins of both terms. What exactly is global enough to be global? Diaspora studies already tell us that cultural practices that are geographically hundreds of miles apart can be familiar to disparate communities. Additionally, communities that are geographically close may have "local" cultural practices that are foreign to some members – and in many urban living situations, the bringing of people from disparate cultures together often guarantees this. In understanding how bongo flava domesticates various cultural elements to articulate a specific musical genre and cultural reality, there is merit in searching for the origins of some elements of the music. However, it is more prudent to remove these elements from the dichotomy of "global" and "local," and instead understand these elements as being constantly negotiated by both their original contexts and their newer ones in bongo flava. Any act that can be considered cultural involves a negotiation of the relationship between people, and as we've seen, in these negotiations there is often always an ability to articulate a change in the community one lives in.

**Conclusion**

Many excellent scholarly works on bongo flava have considered it to be somewhat similar, if not identical, to Tanzanian hip hop. My aim in this chapter is not to write directly against this previous scholarship, but rather to add more nuance to an already complicated conversation about the specifics of both genres' origins. In the case of bongo flava, some argue that it isn't even a genre of music, per se, but rather a broader term for popular culture in Tanzania writ large. Understandably, to rappers in Tanzania, the history of bongo flava pales in comparison to the much longer and richer history of Tanzanian hip hop, which briefly crossed paths with bongo flava, but has since then been quite distinct. An additional place where these two genres cross paths is in their relationship to the axis of political power in Tanzania. Both

genres boast a history of representing Tanzanian masculinity in distinct ways, with appropriately distinct relationships to the state because of said representations. Ultimately, the ways both genres of music reflect and shape popular culture have historical precedents in Tanzania and East Africa more generally. These precedents lend additional credence to the efficacy of music as a political force.

Today, bongo flava is an exciting and dynamic genre of music that continues to elude easy definition. Additionally, the tradition of hip hop in Tanzania is distinctly a reflection of the artistic visions and political aspirations of various actors within Tanzania, and bongo flava's initial existence as hip hop means that it retains a sense of nationalism and political understanding. To define its sonic characteristics is not a fruitless endeavor, but the sound of bongo flava must be temporally characterized; as previously stated, the question of "what does bongo flava sound like" should be followed up with "when?". As further chapters of this dissertation will show, the artists and producers who make bongo flava music are flexible enough to incorporate new sounds, styles, and themes into its world. This flexibility lends even more credibility to the idea that understandings of hybridity when it comes to bongo flava ultimately fall short of describing the genre. The genre's malleability is additionally a source of its political efficacy, and it is perhaps the biggest reason as to why CCM politicians have understood the music to be an effective tool to get the youth vote. Further chapters of this dissertation will seek to unpack bongo flava musicians' relationship to the state, and how the music reflects this relationship. We can move forward with the understanding, however, that bongo flava is not a hybrid genre of different pre-existing pieces, nor is it exclusively hip hop or popular music, or both. It is perhaps best described as a construction of youth culture, both reflective of and exaggerating the life and interests of young people in Tanzania.

## Chapter III:
## "Politics is a Lie; Hip Hop is the Truth"

### Introduction

The title of this chapter represents the attitude towards national politics held by underground rappers in Tanzania. However, the way I came to understand this as a commonly held belief was somewhat of an accidental fieldwork discovery. Before conducting this research, my own understanding of the current ethos of underground rap in Tanzania was that it was a political genre, even if Tanzanians often had to hide their critiques in double entendres and metaphors. The ways that rappers critiqued the government in code follows a longstanding tradition of having to hide one's political activism in their music in Tanzania, as the Tanzanian government has often cracked down on more direct criticism of it. Thus, in my preparation for fieldwork, I expected the question of "do you think hip hop is a political genre," to be followed up with a "yes"; I did not remotely anticipate the need to separate hip hop from the political arena. Many artists I interviewed agreed with me that hip hop deals with politics, in the sense of issues concerning their community being a form of local politics. Yet, nearly everyone I talked to refused to associate the word for politics in Swahili, *siasa,* with hip hop. The phrase in Swahili, "siasa ni uwongo, hip hop ni ukweli," which also is the title of this chapter, was recited to me so many times that I often wondered if my previous interviewees were reaching out to future ones in order to maintain a "party line" on the topic. In spite of these responses, I continued to ask this question, if only to be told no, again and again.

Politics in Tanzania, like politics everywhere, is often considered a dirty game, filled with false promises and people in power who seem to be less attentive than they should be to the

needs of their constituents. A major problem is the bureaucratic and confusing nature of how the government works, and the general distance there is between the people of Tanzania and its government. One of my main interlocutors from Dar es Salaam, Mutalemwa Theobald (who goes by Nash MC or Maalim Nash), argues people sometimes confuse municipal projects like new roads or hospitals as "gifts" from the government, instead of recognizing the tax dollars that more likely made these projects happen. Another Dar rapper, HECHI, is of the opinion that politics isn't useful for people like himself, because they have bigger and more important problems they deal with on a day to day basis. Thus, regular folks find it hard to care about one political party or the other if they are busy working to get money for rent or food. More specifically, he argues:

> Yeah, we have this mentality. Politics is for those who have things. So, we have nothing, We don't want to get involved with that…we need to solve our problems, we need to get money to feed our children. So, we don't want to know what's going on [in politics] because politics is for those who have some (HECHI, interview by author, Dar es Salaam, April 26, 2022).

For him, it is a privilege to care about politics, because that means all your other basic needs have been met. This doesn't mean that many rappers don't pay attention to things that will affect them and their communities; however, to them, politicians rarely are able to articulate the needs and viewpoints of community members the same way rappers can. This is one of the major reasons hip hop can be seen as distinct from politics – to them, the former is what is really going on, and the latter sits in the realm of the abstract, sitting far above the real world.

Hip hop, then, is considered the polar opposite of the perceived treadmill of political action in Tanzania. In contrast to their views on politics, many rappers did agree with the assertion that hip hop can change their communities, and perhaps even their country as a whole.

For example, Bagamoyo rapper Chizo Masta argues that hip hop teaches listeners about their community, arguing that "hip hop kuanza kubadilisha vitu vingi…hip hop ni muziki ambao inamaarifa mengi ambao yanafunza ndani yake" [*Hip hop has already changed many things…hip hop is a music that has a lot of knowledge…that teaches in it*] (Chizo Masta, interview by author, Bagamoyo, April 10, 2022). Other rappers point to ways in which the music has impacted them personally. For example, Tayzo, hailing from Stone Town, says that "hip hop changed my life because it gives me some respect. You know when a person hears your song…on the radio…people give you some respect" (Tayzo, interview by author, Stone Town, March 30, 2022). While the nature of the market of hip hop means that many rappers often wallow in obscurity, even a modest success, like radio play, can garner the praise of your peers and community. Engaging in the difficult and murky practice of politics doesn't always receive similar praise.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, bongo flava today has a completely different sonic and political constitution than its iteration in the 1990s. Notably, there has been a distinct separation of critical language towards the government in the music as it exists today. This critical stance, however, lives on in the attitudes and lyrics of underground Tanzanian rappers. In exploring the myriad of reasons as to why rappers in Tanzania believe politics to be a lie, we can better understand the hope with which rappers imbue the culture, practice, and music of Tanzanian hip hop. For many, this hope imbues hip hop specifically as a grassroots project in reaction to the consolidation of power by the government, who only opened up the country to multiparty elections in the early 1990s, and whose ruling party, CCM, has maintained a supermajority in the Tanzanian parliament since the country's inception. Crucial to my analysis of the political efficacy of hip hop is the relationship between the Tanzanian state and its

constituents, which have historically interacted with one another on uneven and disconnected terms. I will historicize my analysis of this current relationship with a discussion of how these paradigms came to be during the Ujamaa period in the 1970s and 1980s. Afterwards, I will elaborate more on the attitudes of politics that were expressed to me over the course of about 50 interviews with rappers all throughout Tanzania, and how so many were reticent to connect hip hop with politics. Ultimately, I am interested in the disconnect between the ways in which life in Tanzania is represented "officially," by the state, and "realistically," by rappers throughout the country.

**Big Politics; Little Politics**

Since its inception, the Tanzanian state with an issue that plagues all nations when they begin: how to administer a unified political will across a diverse group of people. Alongside the *ujamaa* project, there have been several subsequent initiatives by the Tanzanian state that aim to bridge the gap between the ideas and missions of a historically authoritative government and the lived experiences of citizens in an emerging nation. Ultimately, these governmental missions and quotidian experiences make up two versions of politics, which I will label as big and little politics respectively. Big politics is often the connotative idea for the Swahili word *siasa*, meaning politics; the lack of interest current rappers had in siasa can be attributed to a disenfranchisement with the larger political system in Tanzania. Big politics cannot work for them, nor do they feel represented by those within this system (with few exceptions). Little politics, on the other hand, is very often the purview of rap lyrics. These lyrics often discuss personal or community problems, whether they be the stresses of everyday life (securing income, working a job, wanting to advance one's career), or securing one's place in the ecosystem of Tanzanian rappers, through boasting or raw talent. Additionally, rappers may also discuss

romantic love in their music, but often in a less melodramatic way than how the topic is treated in bongo flava culture. Most rappers I interviewed had no problem with my understanding of little politics being central to hip hop music, but because of their own connotations and connections with siasa meaning big politics, many refused to admit that hip hop was a political genre. Historically, popular music, including hip hop, has been utilized to bridge the gap between big and little politics. The music's use as self-expression helped describe the issues of the regular folk to government officials, and today, bongo flava helps make the Tanzania state more relevant to these regular folk. This relationship between the state and the people began under the principles of ujamaa[8], a socialist project spearheaded by the nation's first President, Julius Nyerere.

Before 1961, Tanzania did not exist – the area was known as Tanganyika, and was considered a "British league of Nations mandate between 1922 to 1961" (Lal 2015: 6). The country as it exists today was not fully formed until 1964, when Zanzibar was freed from protectorate status from the British, and joined mainland Tanzania to create the United Republic of Tanzania. The circumstances of Zanzibar joining the Tanzanian Union are perhaps one of the largest, enduring splits that the Tanzanian government has to reckon with to this day. Notably, the constitution uniting mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar was formed in a largely undemocratic process and was "never formally ratified by the Revolutionary Council in Zanzibar" (Sheriff 2014: 73). This was a uniting of two sovereign states during which regular citizens, both on the mainland as well as on Zanzibar, had little to no say on how this new country was to be governed, and what goals the new country has for the future[9]. The first permanent constitution

[8] In Swahili, ujamaa translates to "brotherhood" or "family."
[9] The undemocratic creation of Tanzania's constitution is one of the major reasons there have been campaigns for constitutional reform, or even revision, for almost twenty years.

was ratified in 1977, under similarly undemocratic circumstances, including a deliberation of said constitution in parliament that lasted only three hours. Issa Shivji makes the salient point that "it is difficult to argue that the 1977 Constitution has either political legitimacy or represents a consensus (Sheriff: 74). In the wake of said constitution passing, he was one of the loudest voices calling for a new constitution for the state, one based in popular participation from the Tanzanian population, and one that better reflected a national consensus for where the country should be, and where it should go. To this day, however, no new major reforms have been made to Tanzania's constitution, although the current president has begun publicly indicating that CCM is ready to seriously address this issue in 2025. All of this is to say the people of Tanzania have long been due for a more representative and participatory democracy.

By being both an ideological project and a pragmatic way of organizing the country, ujamaa significantly influenced the ways Tanzanians understood their nation, abstractly and concretely. In his famous 1967 Arusha Declaration, Nyerere argued that socialism was the way forward for the nation, which meant a nationalizing of the means of agricultural production, and a ruling party "of peasants and workers" (Nyerere 1967). Nyerere also considered ujamaa to be a rejection of "the central assumptions and priorities of capitalism," while also stripping socialism of its Marxist historical polemic, where the logical endpoint of capitalism was an eventual socialist revolution (Lal 2017: 27). Namely, Nyerere argued that industry and development were Western concepts which bred insidious forms of exploitation, which he opposed at all costs. The creation of larger urban centers, he argued, may engender exploitation where "the town dwellers [are] exploiting the peasants"; the peasants, in this case, being those committed to a more rural lifestyle in Tanzania (Nyerere 1967). He had seen well intentioned socialist projects recreate capitalist modes of exploitation, which he referred to as "temptations": an interesting word

choice, which conflates the spread of capitalism with a moral imbalance in the community (Nyerere). Knowing that he could not compete with the industrialized world, given the head start these countries had on the newly minted state, Nyerere decided the focus of ujamaa was what he believed to be Tanzania's economic strength – agriculture. The country was to be developed around an idealized village, referencing a precolonial past of community-oriented work and mutual assistance (Lal 2017: 27). In the village, the family was the unit of organization at home and as a nation; after all, Nyerere's nickname was *Baba wa Taifa*, or the "father of the nation." Ultimately, Nyerere believed he could engender nationalism by making the peasant class of farmers in Tanzania the focus of the direction of the new country.

In spite of these good intentions, a divide between rural and urban areas persisted in the form of "postcolonial state elites" positioned in a hirearchy above "backward populations" in the countryside that needed to be developed through villagization (Schneider 2006: 107). Tanzania, after all, was a postcolonial state, and during colonization, elites (often living in cities) were able to advance themselves within the colonial apparatus; once the British administration was removed, said elites did not automatically divest their political power. While some Tanzanians today look back on ujamaa with nostalgia for better times, others are correct in labeling this period as authoritarian on the state's part. Like the ratification of the constitution, "villagization was not shaped by the legal institutional structures of the state"; these precedents instead were 'either ignored entirely or simply reshaped to fit the purposes of this particular state project" (Schneider 106). Furthermore, urban citizens who resisted against these new ideals were "dealt with by Nyerere in the manner rather of an incensed head of family" (Schneider: 111). A prime example of this policy were student protests in 1966 and 1978, both ending in expulsion of many students without any real legal precedent or basis. While there are parallels to ujamaa in the way

regular citizens live their lives today, perhaps the more important precedent of this project was a defining of what "big politics" was in Tanzania: a strongly held form of power that did not leave room for dissent. Even in recent years, the previous presidential administration of John Magufuli echoed Nyerere's distaste for dissent, particularly in the media being made in Tanzania. The tradition of hip hop in this country has always, then, had to be delicate with the ways it critiqued political figures.

**Kujitegemea**

Ujamaa was initially presented to the public as an "attitude of mind." This foundational attitude set an expectation of how one should live in this new country, relying on certain principles that worked on both a global political level and a local one. Two concepts, self-reliance and security, "became prominent elements of Tanzanian political discourse" during the initial decade of Tanzania's independence, alongside the aforementioned villagization project (Schneider: 55). A focus on an agrarian social and economic organization represented the "peasant" in the Tanzanian state, and a focus on "security," broadly defined, paved the way politically for a one-party state, with a tough policy on sedition in the name of preserving nationalism. The concept of self-reliance, kujitegemea in Swahili, however, arguably encompassed the major goal of the new country, in all of its many forms: freedom from the first and second worlds, from the global capitalist system, from predatory IMF loans, and from the concept of money "to be the big instrument of [Tanzania's] development" (Nyerere 1967). To Nyerere, self-reliance was so crucial because all other paths of assistance from foreign aid, including borrowing money from other governments, would only result in these loans being paid back by the Tanzanian people. In a 1999 interview, he actually named the influence of Booker T Washington in forming his adherence to self-reliance as a core ideal of ujamaa; namely, he noted

that “I was concerned about education…there were skills we needed and black people outside of Africa had them” (Nyerere 1999). In the villages, kujitegemea “sought to create self-reliant rural settlements based on agricultural production,” without imported goods that entangled Tanzanians in global complex economies (Lal 2017: 130). For Nyerere, learning how to build an agrarian economy and create self-reliant settlements could be achieved through widescale education. For many Tanzanians, however, the ethos of self-reliance in one’s day to day life was more important, and more commonly implemented, than the grander plans of ujamaa (which sometimes struggled with carrying out its goals). Today, the enduring legacy of self-reliance in from ujamaa today remains in a cultural understanding of work and hustle as being integral to Tanzanian life, especially life in urban centers.

The ethos of self-reliance today is in fact a derivative of its original incarnation during ujamaa, but its implementation has shifted from big to small politics. Originally, kujitegemea was understood to be a way to work hard “to help yourself and those around you in order to strengthen the nation” (Perullo 2011: 11). However, in the 1980s, the ujamaa project was dissolved in the wake of domestic economic downfalls, and the country’s second president, Ali Hassan Mwinyi, enacted a reversal of Nyerere’s socialist and isolationist policies: this included accepting loans from the IMF and the World Bank. Mwinyi’s attitudes towards the economy reflected in his relaxed approach towards personal economic ventures, and “Mwinyi allowed people to pursue entrepreneurial activities that had previously been restricted or banned during the socialist period” (Perullo 2011: 11). In the wake of a depressed economy and new enterprising opportunities, there was a massive increase in “imported goods, new technologies, and small enterprises” that helped regular citizens keep the lights on at home (Perullo 2011: 11.). Here, the idea of self-reliance took on a political praxis at the individual level: now, one can and

should try and do anything to survive. This culture of hustling at the local level to make ends meet has a name too: bongo; this is why when hip hop in Tanzania was referred to as bongo flava, it retained a connotation of hustle and ingenuity. Dar es Salaam also took on the name bongo in the 1980s due to the city's reputation for being "filthy, unfriendly to some extent, except when you had the brains to help you survive" (Perullo 2011: 9).[10] Both bongo and kujitegemea are integral parts of life in a Tanzanian metropolis, so consequently, these values can also be seen in the hip hop emerging from said urban centers.

Hustling and entrepreneurship is imbued into the hip hop idiom worldwide, and this is especially true in Tanzania. In a sense, the origins of hip hop, as a grassroots youth arts program in the face of abandonment by the state, was a form of self-reliance and hustling: helping each other when the institutions who were supposed to do so failed. Being a rapper in Tanzania means that you have to be intelligent in the way you go about your business as an artist. A common refrain I heard about hip hop in Tanzania was "hip hop doesn't pay." In a sense, legitimizes the music practice in the eyes of folks who see hip hop as being oppositional to making music purely for financial gain. However, this also reflect an unfortunate reality for most rappers in Tanzania: very few have the ability to make music full time, and most see music as a side gig that they can do alongside their real job until their number is called. Many rappers today also understand this hip hop intelligence and business acumen being grounded in the country's history of self-reliance. Nash MC, one of my main fieldwork collaborators, sees this connection as a way to inspire up and coming artists, and this hustling ethos was one of the main ideas around a series of professional development seminars he conducted throughout the country. The project was called

[10] During my time in Dar es Salaam, I noticed that if there was something to be sold, a person was out on the streets selling it. Intersections and traffic jams (both times during which taxis and bajajis need to stop and wait for traffic to clear) are often peak periods where merchants would walk between cars and sell everything from water, cashews, toys, phone cases, and fruit. If one wished, one could purchase numerous home essentials from a single taxi ride.

"*Sanaa Kwa Manufaa*," or "Cypher for the Future," and focused on both the history of hip hop in Tanzania as well as globally, and more concrete professional development ideas, such as how to market one's music, studio and recording etiquette, and even ways to conduct oneself on stage. Additionally, the project was aimed specifically at mostly younger artists because of the issues surrounding employment in said demographic. As a sustainable career, hip hop in Tanzania is not supported in any significant way by government institutions, so it is organizations and programs like these that help create community and grow the movement.

The topic of kujitegemea and hip hop also came up during my interview with Gego Master and Lugombo Makanta. For Gego, self-reliance is an integral part of hip hop culture in Tanzania, in that rappers have operated independently from labels since the genre began; thus, it is inseparable from this ujamaa ethos. Namely, he argues:

| | |
|---|---|
| Self-reliance kwa maana uwe ya kujitegemea, ni kitu ambacho hip hop, as a culture, inapreach throughout…Kwa sitegemee mtu mgine, sindiyo? Kwa maana vile kwamba nafanya vitu viyangu ambavyo vinasustain…vitu ambavyo navifanya mimi nafanya independent, kama kujitegemea | *[Self-reliance in the sense of being independent, is something that hip hop, as a culture, preaches throughout. Because I don't rely on anyone else, do I? In the sense that I do my own things that I sustain. The things that I do I do independently, like kujitegemea.]* |

(Lugombo Makanta & Gego Master, interview with author, Dar es Salaam, March 28, 2022).

As an individual, self-reliance is the only way to survive in the world of Tanzanian hip hop. However, Lugombo also connects the community projects he participated in with this earlier form of Tanzanian socialism. Specifically, he recalls an open mic he helped organize in Mbeya called the "Africa Uhuru Street Cypher." This was an important event for self-reliance in the Tanzanian hip hop community because it encouraged productive conversation and intellectual freedom. Specifically, Lugombo states that:

| | |
|---|---|
| Tukisema Africa uhuru kuchuri uhuru kifikra. Africa uhuru kuchuri uhuru kifikra. "It begins with you" tunaambia MCs. Wewe make sure unafanya kitu to be free. Hutakuwa na complain. Kwa sababu ile ujamaa ujitegemea imekaa - you have to do something to be productive. Halafu huwezi kujitegemea. | [*When we say freedom in Africa, we mean intellectual freedom. African freedom is intellectual freedom. 'It begins with you,' we tell the MCs. You make sure you do something to be free. You will not have a complaint, because the self reliance, the socialism, is here – you have to do something to be productive. Or else, you can't be independent*] |

(Lugombo Makanta & Gego Master, interview with author, Dar es Salaam, March 28, 2022).

Lugombo goes on to say that complaints without solutions in general are discouraged, and even goes so far to say that one would be called a loser if one participated in an open mic with this kind of attitude. Lugombo and Gego both understand their position in their communities as being thought leaders, and they do not take said positions lightly. Additionally, one can consider these two men to be, like other successful hip hop artists, role models for younger artists looking to make a living in the music industry: a tall order in an already difficult labor market. Success in the world of Tanzanian hip hop requires resiliency above all else, as it is common to experience little or no significant financial renumeration from your craft.

Nash MC, Gego Master, and Lugombo Makanta represent hip hop community members who see this music culture as a way out of the commonly referenced stagnant and difficult labor market in Tanzania. These artists identify young Tanzanian men as benefitting the most from professional development and mentorship, namely because "pressures to be financially independent post-schooling are a considerable source of anxiety" for this demographic (Banks 2016: 444). This is not to say young women do not face similar employment challenges. However, cultural expectations around both women's responsibilities in the home and the appropriateness of a young woman rapping stymie the engagement of young female musicians

with these kinds of community projects.[11] Additionally, hip hop in Tanzania, like hip hop everywhere, absorbs the patriarchal culture surrounding it, and so any development of said culture is going to primarily be target at men unless otherwise reconfigured. Thus, developing oneself as an independent rapper, as a gainfully employed citizen, and as a self-reliant urban man is a process of legitimizing one's masculinity. As we will see in later chapters, the emergence of a legitimate masculine identity is essential for maintaining political power at various levels of government.

**Hip Hop and Politics Today in Tanzania**

Historically, the ujamaa project is an effective way to conceptualize the relationship between the Tanzanian state and its people from the top down. In fact, this top-down approach – where I examine this relationship through the actions and attitudes of the government – is how I interpret the ways in which bongo flava on social media is utilized for purposes of advancing CCM policy. However, my interviews with underground rappers revealed the extent in which the common person is alienated from government policy in Tanzania. My interviewees had a few different explanations as to why they felt that hip hop was not a political genre. For starters: calling oneself a political rapper in a country where artists do not have legally protected speech is a dangerous game to play. Quite a few interviewees, when asked about this specific paradigm, brought up the story of Roma Mkatoliki as a cautionary tale. As the story goes, he was a prominent rapper who, under the Magufuli regime in 2018, was briefly kidnapped and intimidated by government officials because of a song he made that was critical of the Tanzanian government. The details of what exactly happened are hazy, but Roma has effectively been

[11] For example: Sanaa Kwa Manufaa worked with about 100 rappers in ten cities throughout Tanzania. Only four were women.

excommunicated from the country, and now lives in the United States. This story has had a chilling effect on rappers who consider themselves to be politically minded, and forces them to be more careful what to and not to say in their music. Thus, even if one decides to take aim at a local government official or a political decision, there is a sense that it is a dangerous game to play that one will eventually lose.

Roma's story is also significant because his kind of singularly focused attitude about hip hop, in that it is a political tool to use against those in power, is considered one of many use cases for hip hop as a whole. The idea that hip hop doesn't need to be political was described to me by a member of the hip hop community in Arusha who goes by Walakdayo. He is someone who does not rap, but is present at open mic events at local malls and spaces in Arusha, and wants to eventually become an agent of sorts for rappers, and quit his day job. Walakdayo told me that hip hop is part of so many things, and calling it only political would be too narrow of a definition for the culture. Namely, he argues "watu kama Roma alifanya vizuri kuwa kupitia mpinzani, lakini, mimi sidhani [hip hop] ni siasa kwamba maana kuna wasanii wengi wa hip hop hawafanyi siasa kabisa" [*People like Roma have done well by being an opponent [of the state], but to me, I don't think hip hop is politics because there are many rappers who don't do politics at all*] (Next_tz & Walakdayo, interview with author, Arusha, May 12, 2022). To Walakdayo, Roma's encounter with the government has created a buzz around him which is why he refers to this ordeal as "doing well." However, many folks disagree with Roma's approach to hip hop as being as outwardly confrontational, or even if they do, are hesitant to put themselves and their families in danger. Finally, this quote ends by mentioning the many rappers that do not do politics at all in their music – we shouldn't interpret this as meaning that many rappers in Tanzania only focus on superficial ideas in their music. Rather, the ways in which issues can and

should be brought up have to be clandestine and discreet, in a complex hip hop vernacular that doesn't name names, but instead signals what it means to those in the know.

However, an overwhelming majority of responses I received to the question of whether hip hop was a political music indicated a perceived disconnect between the realities of hip hop and the "realities" of politics. Most discussions of politics argued that neither local political actors, nor the game of politics as a whole, exists in a truthful and legitimate way. For example, some rappers expressed to me the belief that many politicians simply show up to greet their constituents when they need votes, and then do not deliver on their promises. This is a historically held sentiment amongst rappers in Tanzania; Professor Jay expressed the same idea in his 2001 song "Ndio Mzee," where he imitates a phony politician making grandiose claims about what he will accomplish once elected. In an interview with Stone Town based rapper Gangsta, he expresses a similar sentiment, saying "Ni mchezo chafu siasa…Siasa si kweli" [*Politics is a dirty game. Politics is not the truth*] (Gangsta, interview with author, Stone Town, March 30, 2022). For others, the genre of hip hop is synonymous with knowledge and real advice, which is incompatible with the false nature of information coming from politicians. This wasn't always the case, as Mwanza rapper Msouthtz argues, "hip hop ni muziki wa siasa? No. Hiyo zamani, watu wengi ndo waliko kuwa wanaifanya kama siasa lakini siku hizi, hiphop ni mziki wa kutoka knowledge" [*Hip hop is political music? No. In the past, many people were doing it as politics, but nowadays, hip hop is music to give knowledge*] (Msouthtz, interview with author, Mwanza, March 08, 2022). Here, he articulates this notion that hip hop has previously been entangled in the world of politics, potentially referring to the politicking of artists such as Professor Jay or TMK Wanaume, who played active roles in steering political consciousnesses (and votes) with their music. Today, however, this task has been replaced with this notion of

knowledge, which can mean a number of things: the knowledge of the streets (or bongo), knowledge as the fifth element of hip hop, or even knowledge of particular places and situations. Regardless of whichever definition is connotated in these kinds of answers, knowledge in hip hop is decidedly a concept that exists outside of, or even in opposition to, political information.

Another reason that hip hop is not considered political is the ways that political decisions are perceived to affect the population. This chapter opened with a quote from the rapper HECHI, who argued that "politics is for those who have some." This sentiment is reflected in my conversation with Mwanza rapper Ubalozi (whose name, ironically, translates to embassy or ambassador). He argues that political decision-making occurs in all sorts of organizations, starting from the family unit, moving to larger and larger communities, and then finally to the national level. The decisions made at the highest level, which to him constitute politics (Big politics, for the sake of this paper), do not affect the smaller organizations of people in Tanzania as much as they should, and rather are made in the self-interest of ruling elites. Notably, he argues "hip hop inagusa siasa kwa upande mkubwa kwa sababu in most cases, most of the decisions zinazofanya katika different levels it's not for the masses…you see, it's for a small group of people…who are running or who are leading the state" [*Hip hop affects (touches) politics in a big way because in most cases, most of the decisions made at different levels, it's not for the mass(es), you see, it's for a small group of people…who are running or who are leading the state*] (Ubalozi, interview with author, Mwanza, May 9, 2022). He continues on to make more differences between political decision making and hip hop, discussing the lyrics to rap songs in a way that is reminiscent of early understandings of gangsta rap: "tunareflect mazingira," or "we reflect our surroundings" (Ubalozi, 2022). At the end of his answer to my question about hip hop and politics, he makes another interesting assertion: people do not feel

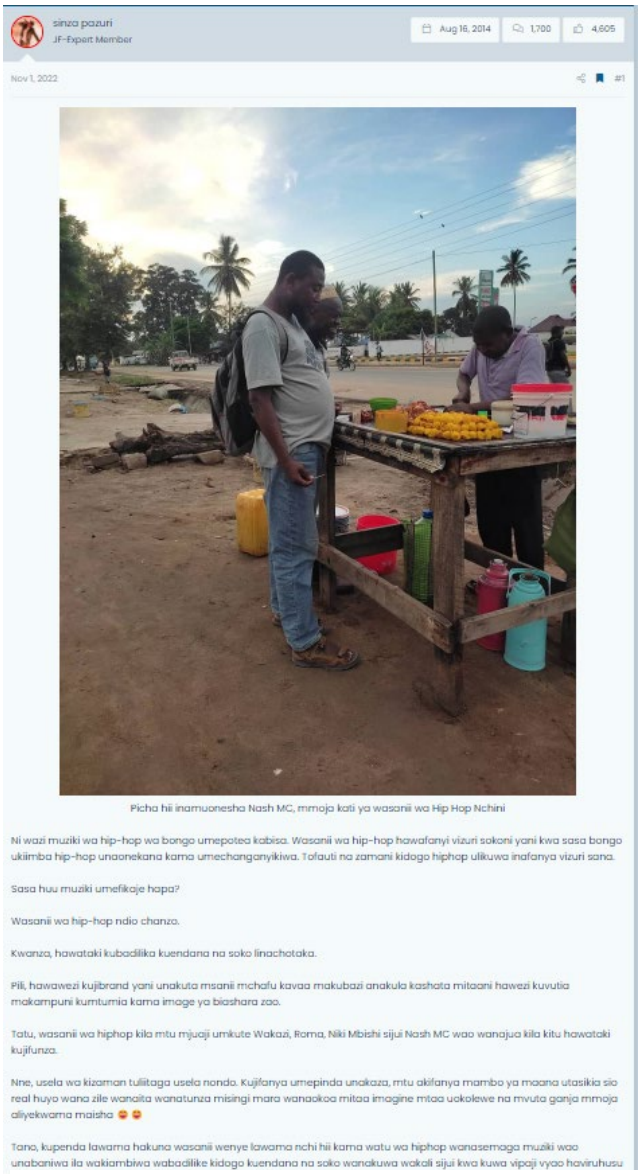
represented by politicians in the same way that they feel represented by rappers and their music. This, he argues, is why rap is so popular amongst regular people, even if it doesn't enjoy astounding financial success as a community. It is also why older rappers such as Professor Jay or Mr. II have enjoyed significant political recognition as parliament members, even if they are still part of a minority opposition party. In Ubalozi's view, most people see their struggles represented in hip hop music more clearly and more realistically than any political campaign.

While politics is considered a dirty game and generally filled with falsehoods, there is still a sentiment that political messaging is effective and dangerous. This is why rappers need to work hard to be the antidote to the allure of political ideas in society, which can lead regular people to do things they do not know much about. Mwanza rapper Akhu_tz says calls politics a "trick," and that politicians use these tricks of information and vocabulary to get what they want. Namely, he argues "…siasa tafsiri yake ni ujanja ujanja," [*the interpretation of politics is trickery*] (Akhu_tz, interview with author, Mwanza, March 07, 2022). Here, Akhu_tz argues for another layer of political trickery – not only do politicians lie to their constituents, but political messages in general are full of double interpretations that mislead people to come to their own conclusions. Later in the interview, he then compares these messages to the lyrics of Roma Mkatoliki, which he argues are straight to the point, and cannot be equivocated. Education of the population is an ongoing issue in Tanzania, and due to numerous factors, many students drop of out of school after finishing their primary education. Thus, rappers are understandably concerned with an uneducated society being told what to think and how to see the world from less-than-altruistic actors in politics. Furthermore, politicians do not seem to consistently act in the public's best interest, but this fact is obscured by the trickery of political messages. However, the question must be asked – how come so many rappers, who care about the well-being of their

communities, distrust the institutions that could make tangible change in said communities? In what capacity do these artists feel like their government has not properly taken care of its citizens?

**Mitihani**

In providing an answer to these questions, we can examine the career and music of Nash MC, who was one of my main collaborators during my in-person fieldwork. Nash is one of the masterminds behind the aforementioned Sanaa Kwa Manufaa project and enjoys popularity as somewhat of a celebrity in the small world of underground hip hop in Tanzania. Nash is part of a group of rappers carrying on a kind of hip hop orthodoxy in Tanzania. For him, and other artists like him such as Nikki Mbishi and Dizasta, authenticity of self and of one's music is the guiding light to being a rapper. To an extent that feels almost stubborn, Nash avoids doing things with his music and marketing that are inauthentic to himself. For example, he only recently started doing radio interviews, because of his disillusion with the media landscape in Tanzania, and its role in potentially watering down the original messages of hip hop. Nash, who is in his thirties, lives with his wife and kids in the middle class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JF-Expert Member
Aug 16, 2014 1,700 4,605
Nov 1, 2022 #1

Picha hii inamuonesha Nash MC, mmoja kati ya wasanii wa Hip Hop Nchini

Ni wazi muziki wa hip-hop wa bongo umepotea kabisa. Wasanii wa hip-hop hawafanyi vizuri sokoni yani kwa sasa bongo ukiimba hip-hop unaonekana kama umechanganyikiwa. Tofauti na zamani kidogo hiphop ulikuwa inafanya vizuri sana.

Sasa huu muziki umefikaje hapa?

Wasanii wa hip-hop ndio chanzo.

Kwanza, hawataki kubadilika kuendana na soko linachotaka.

Pili, hawawezi kujibrand yani unakuta msanii mchafu kavaa makubazi anakula kashata mitaani hawezi kuvutia makampuni kumtumia kama image ya biashara zao.

Tatu, wasanii wa hiphop kila mtu mjuaji umkute Wakazi, Roma, Niki Mbishi sijui Nash MC wao wanajua kila kitu hawataki kujifunza.

Nne, usela wa kizaman tuliitaga usela nondo. Kujifanya umepinda unakaza, mtu akifanya mambo ya maana utasikia sio real huyo wana zile wanaita wanatunza misingi mara wanaokoa mitaa imagine mtaa uokolewe na mvuta ganja mmoja aliyekwama maisha 😍😍

Tano, kupenda lawama hakuna wasanii wenye lawama nchi hii kama watu wa hiphop wanasemaga muziki wao unabaniwa ila wakiambiwa wabadilike kidogo kuendana na soko wanakuwa wakali sijui kwa kuwa vipaji vyao haviruhusu

Figure 3.1: Picture and post about Nash on JamiiForums

Chamazi neighborhood of Dar es Salaam, about an hour bus ride from the city center. He does not wear fancy clothes or flashy jewelry, and often carries a backpack everywhere he goes. In our discussions together throughout my fieldwork, he revealed to me that he too sees a connection between the hustle culture of hip hop and the culture of kujitegemea in Tanzania. His attitude towards marketing his music, where he directly sells his albums and EPs via Whatsapp and other social media platforms, reflects his belief in the DIY attitude. He often cites American rappers such as KRS-One as his personal heroes and role models, and as we'll see later in this article, this admiration of NYC-based 90's rap music greatly inflects his beat selection, lyrics, and flow.

Nash's reputation as an authentic rapper from the "real" streets of Dar es Salaam is well-known. Recently, on the forum JamiiForums.com, a picture circulated of him stopping by the side of the road to eat *kachori*, a deep-fried potato snack. The original poster's intent was to show how disheveled and "lost" Nash and the rest of the underground hip hop world was. In the caption, the original poster, called "sinza pazuri," talks about how rappers these days are universally less successful than the old, golden days of bongo hip hop. This person argues that rappers have a hard time representing themselves and hip hop as positive icons and images, saying that "unakuta msanii mchafu kavaa makubazi anakula kashata mitaani, hawezi kuvutia makampuni kumtumia kama image ya biashara zao" [*You find a dirty artist who wears dirty clothes and eats in the streets, he can't attract companies to use him as an image for their business*] (pazuri 2022). Notably, success for this poster is in the outward reflection of the artist, who here, engaging in the quotidian act of buying street food, is harming his self-image. Even the idea that an artist should be engaged in concerns about brand visibility versus musical talent and reality reflects a major split between the commercial-ready bongo flava artists and the

"rougher" underground hip hop artists, the latter of the two seemingly uninterested in potential brand collaborations. How could a rapper claim to be "real" if he's constantly thinking about how to leverage his persona to sell other products besides his music? Nash's entire appeal is that he is authentic, as claimed by a response to the original post from a user named "Scars": "Nash MC ni moja kati ya wasanii wa Hip Hop ambao wanaishi Maisha yao halisia, mtandaoni mpaka mitaani" [*Nash MC is one of the Hip Hop artists who live their real lives, online to the streets*] (pazuri 2022). In that same post, this user claims that hip hop's bad reputation is actually a result of the listener's poor understanding, instead of the artist's lack of marketing sensibilities. This idea, that an artist needs only good lyrics and an authentic sense of self in all regards to be a "real" rapper in Tanzania is one of the major cultural reasons as to why hip hop, amongst rappers, is seen as the true way of understanding life. To engage in brand-focused activities, generally speaking, is to lose connection with the daily life of your customers and fans.

Nash's most well-known song is "Mitihani,"[12] which translates directly into "examinations" or "tests". It is an extended metaphor for the trials and tribulations of Nash's life. The song was released in 2014 off of Nash's second mixtape entitled *Mzimu Wa Shaaban Robert*, or The Ghost of Shaaban Robert. Here, Nash makes a direct comparison between his lyrical abilities and Shaaban bin Robert, arguably one of the best Swahili poets to ever exist, and a significant proponent of the development of Swahili as a national language. The song's production relies on a repeated, sped up strings sample, with percussion heavily reminiscent of 1990's NYC "boom-bap" hip hop. This stylistic choice focuses the listener on the lyrics and delivery, and in a Tanzanian context, codes the song as being "real" and "legitimate," adding to the idealization of the golden era of hip hop in the Tanzanian rap scene. The story told in the

[12] Embedded links to this song and others referenced in this dissertation can be found in Appendix A.

song is somewhat autobiographical – he names real members of people in his life, but it is not true. The song is divided up into three verses, each punctuated by a chorus that goes "Usipagawe, usichachawenenda taratibu kapanga Manani/Usipagawe, usichachawe.... utapata jibu yote ni mitihani" [*Don't go crazy, don't go mad, this is God's Plan/Don't go crazy, don't go mad, you will get every answer, all are tests*] (Nash 2014). This chorus functions as both a refrain of Nash telling himself this advice, to "trust God's Plan," as well as advice for the listener, who may resonate this message of belief and faith. Nash himself is Muslim, as are many Tanzanians who live on the eastern coast of the country. The more inland you go, the more Christian the population becomes, with Christians making up a supermajority of the population of Tanzania. Regardless of the specific practice of faith, the message is simple and effective as a refrain in a country where many ground their lives in belief in a higher power.

The verses go into detail about various trials Nash faces in his life; the second verse specifically provides insight into the understanding of role of the state in Tanzanian life at the local level. Nash raps that he headed to a town called Masasi, in the Mtwara reigon of Tanzania in the Southeast corner of the country. There, he works on his grandmother's farm, growing crops such as corn and rice, which flourish in the spring. In the harvest time, however, Nash raps that "Mavuno yalipoanza, mtendaji akatangaza,wanyama haribifu wamevamia mashamba/ wanakula mazao usiku na mchana / Yote niliyofanya mwaka huu yakakwama" [*When the harvest began, the state official announced that vermin have invaded the farms/They are eating the crops day and night/everything I did this year came to a standstill*] (Nash 2014). While it is not directly the state official's fault, it is notable that he is the bearer of bad news, that he, like the vermin that have invaded the farm, are a malevolent force in these farmer's lives. In the song's previous verse, he had just escaped charges of being an accessory to robbery in the cities;

now, when he tries to lead a more honest life, the trials of his former life seem to follow him to Masasi. Later in the verse, he continues his story in that same town, describing how he bounced back from this initial setback to create a profitable farming business. He notes that he is blamed for the theft of a village motorcycle, and was arrested about to be imprisoned until a man identified the correct culprit and he was set free. Again, the courts in this verse are considered a malevolent force, but they are not completely outside of human control, as they follow the accusations of community members to wrongly imprison Nash. It is only through the assistance of good community members that Nash can walk free at the end of the verse, and proclaim once again to not get frustrated, and trust God's plan.

If these issues the song talks about seem ordinary, it is because they are. The song's lyrics walk a fine line between a stylized story of struggle without being too unrealistic, and relatable without being completely quotidian. This description of life and hardship happening to ordinary people is the "small-p-politics" that engenders a sense of reality to Nash's music, as well as hip hop in Tanzania as a whole. When asked about the song's popularity, Nash told me that one specific aspect of the song's relatable nature was that "Kwa Tanzania, ni kawaida kutumia neno Mitihani…pale anapopatwa na shida, tabu, au maradhi" [*In Tanzania, it is common to use the word tests…when one has problems, trouble or is sick*] (Nash MC, interview by author, Virtual, December 4, 2022). Many people in Tanzania utilize this term "mitihani" to discuss the various issues they have in their lives, and by describing a series of hypothetical scenarios that Nash has lived through, Nash validates the usage of this term as well as the importance of their problems (i.e., they are important enough to make a rap song about). To many listeners, perhaps there is a feeling of disconnect with the government when it comes to problems like these, and pragmatically, the government cannot be held solely responsible for crop failure, or personal

tragedy. However, through songs like “Mitihani,” regular issues are made legitimate by rappers throughout Tanzania. This, perhaps, is key to understanding the perspective of hip hop being one of the only “true” ways to describe the world.

While somewhat autobiographical accounts of life make up a significant portion of Nash’s music, he is also no stranger to more explicitly political songs. A pertinent example is his song “Mchochezi,” off of Nash’s 2015 mixtape of the same name. The word, “mchochezi,” means protester, or literally “instigator,” and on this song, Nash takes aim at the leaders of Tanzania catering to foreign interests and investors instead of their own people. It is interesting that Nash takes a Nyerere-style approach to Tanzanian nationalism and critiques the modern application of Tanzania’s opening up to the world. The origins of rap music and hip hop culture in Tanzania stem directly from a consciously laissez-faire approach to foreign media and money, and without it, the ability for individual artists to critique the state may be even more hampered than it currently is today. However, it is easy to draw parallels between ujamaa and the community building nature of hip hop culture. As previously stated: one of ujamaa’s major goals was based around community assistance and mutual aid. This can be understood as a top-down approach to said mutual aid, as it was implemented by a government who would not tolerate other ways of community organizing. Hip hop, in its original inception, was a form of mutual aid – a community run arts project designed to fill the gap left by more official arts programs that were either underfunded or cut altogether. While the principles of ujamaa would have never allowed foreign culture like hip hop to flourish in Tanzania, Nash re-contextualizes its concept of community building in a modern context in this song. To Nash, the government has lost sight of its purpose to serve its constituents, and requires an “instigator” to set them back on the right track.

The song's production further cements Nash's interest in boom bap as an aesthetic signifying seriousness and legitimacy. Production is handled by longtime associate Palla, another acolyte of the boom bap sound in Nash's camp, and the same Palla referenced in the lyrics of "Mitihani." The stuttering kick and snare, which seem to lurch forward under a chopped-up string sample, reference a J-Dilla type attitude to time and rhythm in the song. The song's lyrics position Nash as a representative of the people, notably through his use of the "mn" prefix in Swahili signifying the plural second person, or "us," in English. Specifically, one can see this in the lines "Ndiyo, mnatuibia pesa bado mnatesa Tz," [*Yes, you are still stealing money from us and still torturing us Tanzanians*] or "Na Mnakula kodi tukijoji hamtusikii" [*And you eat taxes, if we ask you don't listen*] (Nash 2015). Like other rappers and Swahili poets before him, Nash heightens his message with symbolism and metaphor, particularity with lines like "Bila ya visa Wanyama wanasafirishwa" [*Without a Visa, animals are shipped away*] or "Viongozi wa Bongo mnaongoza kwa madudu" [*The leaders of Tanzania are leading through bad influences*] (Nash 2015). While the first line relies on imagery to convey its message, the second of these lines works on a number of idiomatic levels. Specifically, when utilizing the term "bongo," Nash means "Tanzania," instead of "brains" or "Dar es Salaam," the latter two being literal and another idiomatic translation of that word in a hip hop context. The next phrase, which directly translates into "leading by insects," utilizes the slang version of *madudu*, which means bad thoughts or influences. Utilizations of "street Swahili" in Tanzanian hip hop follows the tradition of similar practices in other forms of hip hop worldwide, as well as this vernacular's usage in other Tanzanian pop music cultures. Politically, this usage can also illuminate another reason as to why hip hop is considered more "real" than the official language about Tanzanian life coming from the state. Rappers describe quotidian issues and concerns using a language more familiar to

regular Tanzanians, even if it is sometimes couched in imagery and metaphor. Nash's musical catalog is an excellent example of why many rappers share this understanding of hip hop not necessarily being political, but rather a more true representation of how life happens.

**Conclusion**

The responses I received to my question as to whether or not hip hop was political demonstrate a fundamental underpinning of how these practitioners see their music and their culture. History and authenticity remain core components of hip hop, both in Tanzania and the United States. Justin Williams argues that in American hip hop culture, "a number of artists borrow from the 'old school' as representative of a historically authentic hip-hop identity," where a romanticizing of the pre-recorded days of hip hop can garner credibility and legitimacy (Williams 2011: 135). I believe a stylistic adherence to boom-bap by artists such as MC Nash and others is another form of this performance of authenticity, whereby setting their lyrics to specific types of production they cement themselves as "real" artists. This, perhaps, is why so many rappers see hip hop as the "truth," because in the world of underground hip hop in Tanzania it is ideal to position oneself as authentic both through production, lyrics, and online persona. Above all else, the hip hop commitment to authenticity is what drives the political understanding of rappers and fans of hip hop in Tanzania. In understanding this, rappers can leverage any number of public-facing products in order to appeal to this belief and culture of authenticity, including one's lyrics, persona, social media posts, and production choice. All can signal either a commitment to said culture or a deviation from it, and create an impression that one is not authentic.

This lack of authenticity is perhaps the most popular claim about bongo flava music made by hip hop heads[13] in Tanzania. Bongo flava, as a music that both rejects this orthodox sound and affect in the interest of financial gain, as well as a realpolitik attitude towards working with the government during election years, is in some ways not ideologically opposed to the political leanings of Tanzanian hip hop. It is, however, not that simple to fix the genres to a binary of little and big politics. Plenty of rappers, interested in their own financial success, make songs that aesthetically may borrow elements from the latest bongo flava songs, or purposefully do not mention anything that could ever be considered political in their lyrics. For example, while Nash is traditional in the marketing of his music and sound, others who I have quoted in this piece are more open to modern methods of selling and marketing their music, as well as changing their sound to reflect more modern tastes and listening sensibilities. HECHI, for example, takes no aim at politicians, or even focuses on politics at all, and instead creates highly autobiographical music. His last two songs, released on YouTube this year, are still rap songs, but focus on romantic involvements in his own life. If people consider that topic to not be "real," I'd imagine HECHI couldn't care less; he is perhaps most interested in music that reflects himself and the community he grew up in. And in my eyes, this does not make him an illegitimate hip hop artist.

As I will argue in later chapters, the counterpoint to this depiction of reality in Tanzanian hip hop is bongo flava music, which has positioned itself for decades as the public facing sound of Tanzania. For many, while this music is shamelessly profit-focused, it is also a unique and beautiful music style that is as accessible and "real" as Tanzanian underground hip hop. The culture of bongo flava's involvement in the national elections also means that when politics is

[13] In hip hop culture, to be called a "hip hop head" is to be understood as an enthusiast of the culture, or one who is deeply knowledgeable about many facets of hip hop as an arts movement.

inserted into this music, many people take that politics at face value. To my knowledge, this turn against the state narrative by underground rappers is one that does not elicit significant support in Tanzania by the majority of its population. However, to the initiated few, there is only one true way to describe the world, and reflect the problems that Tanzanians face every day. Politics has led them astray, and politicians never have their best interests at heart. Only hip hop, in its raw storytelling and authentic nature, can ever be considered the truth.

## Chapter IV:

## Social Media and Bongo Flava Politics

### Introduction

When I started fieldwork for this dissertation, I had a problem that perhaps plagues many new researchers. I had studied bongo flava and Tanzanian hip hop from a distance for years, but had very few, if any, actual contacts in the scene, who were either making, listening to, or talking about the music today. Faced with a temporary dearth of research funding, and a rapidly evolving pandemic, I turned to social media to begin this process of "entering the scene." I began by following people associated with bongo flava on sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to start tracking the daily news and drama associated with this musical world. This was both to try and conduct ethnographic research digitally, while also understanding these sites as an archival space, where knowledge about bongo flava is created and stored. I also joined more intimate communities on audio chatrooms like Clubhouse, and more traditional online forums like JamiiForums.com; this was to further try and meet individuals to interview, and go a step further in my process of digital ethnography. The eventual goal of my virtual net casting was phone numbers to text on Whatsapp. For a non-Tanzanian, Whatsapp is the most efficient way to stay in contact with folks in the country. Moreover, it is an app widely used by people throughout the world who do not have iPhones, but want the multimedia messaging capabilities of iMessage. As I would learn, it is also *the* site of commerce for independent artists in Tanzania, to the point where any number in one's phone could be considered a fan and a potential buyer. Bigger artists can rely on streaming services, as well as Instagram posts and radio spots to generate hype and point fans in the direction of their music, but for independent artists, they are

their own label, marketing department, and distribution center. One of the primary apps where this happens is Whatsapp.

However, I met my first interlocutor, a Mwanza based rapper named Fivara, on Clubhouse. I did not intend to make connections immediately in the chatroom, opting to simply listen to the ways in which hip hop was being discussed, and the cadence of a type of casual and conversational Swahili I had not previously been exposed to. However, despite my best efforts to be discreet, my conspicuous profile as a "graduate student studying bongo flava and Tanzanian hip hop" caught his attention – there weren't that many people in the room who presented themselves as researchers and students. Fivara was the one who introduced me to Nash, and from there, the rest of my interlocutors in the Tanzanian hip hop scene. Compared to a more traditional rapper like Nash MC, Fivara spends more time building his brand online, and has a more accepting attitude towards online media. One of the major appeals of social media, for him, is the way it can be utilized for entrepreneurial pursuits, which is extremely vital for someone who is trying to make it in the music business. One of the major features of his online presence is a weekly segment called "Fivabars," uploaded every Sunday to his Instagram. This segment features him rapping over a beat with lyrics written over the course of

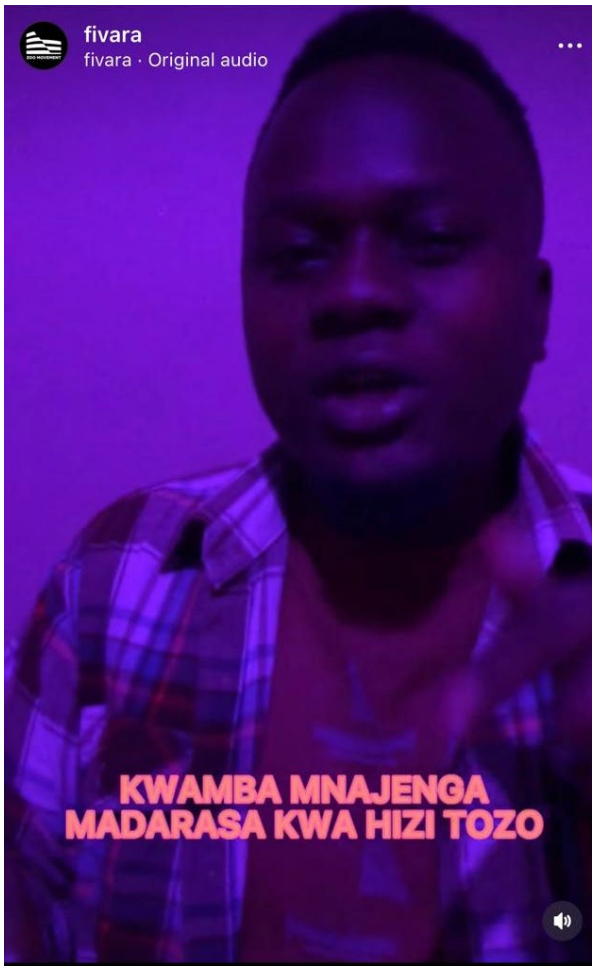

*Figure 4.1: Fivabars Screenshot from August 25, 2020*

that week – the production quality and video is purposefully DIY, featuring only the rapper addressing the camera and lyrics on the bottom of the screen. The overall effect invites viewers into Fivara's workplace, and feels like we are part of his process of crafting songs that will eventually go into an album; in other words, this feels like watching a professional athlete train in the gym. In the last chapter, I argued that underground rappers like Fivara articulate a version of life in Tanzania that aims to be as authentic as possible. The production of content like this helps achieve this effect of politically authentic music, even if the lyrics do not specifically name issues pertinent to Fivara's local community.

While social media has been extremely influential to the lives and careers of small artists, bongo flava pop stars have gained the most from this change in the music business. Online accounts for bongo stars are able to capture an audience that is significantly more diverse and larger than terrestrial radio could ever hope for. One of the major reasons that some Tanzanian stars are even known internationally is because of their profiles on sites like Instagram and Twitter. Pop star Diamond Platnumz is the most successful bongo flava star to harness the reach of social media; his activity on these sites probably played an equal role with his music in earning him a spot on Netflix's reality show "Young, Famous, and African."[14] Artists like Diamond has also attracted the attention of the Tanzanian ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, or "the party of the revolution," which was the original party of Julius Nyerere when the country was founded in 1963. In the last election in 2020, CCM was invested (some would argue quite literally) in Diamond because of the massive audience he amasses from his exploits online. Bongo flava artists sometimes attract the ire of the government for inappropriate acts, like in

[14] From Netflix: "This reality series follows a crew of famed, affluent stars as they work and play, flirt and feud in Johannesburg, South Africa."

2018 when the song “Mwanza,” performed by Rayvanny and Diamond, was banned from the airwaves for the song’s title and chorus, which “contains the Swahili word for ‘horny’” (bbc.com 2018). However, the government is willing to provide slaps on the wrist for these kinds of actions, in exchange for making sure these artists are willing to support CCM during election years. While bongo flava’s presence online is now a crucial part of the music’s culture (and the reason for its now international popularity), it also is positioned by the Tanzanian ruling political party as a useful tool to garner votes.

This chapter will describe the culture of bongo flava online, and how said culture is an important political tool in the Tanzanian government, in which CCM has had a historical and current majority. One of the major appeals for bongo flava culture to CCM is how said culture is cataloged and distributed via social media to millions of young people. This proccess is incredibly important for articulating a version of Tanzania that seeks to celebrate the past successes of CCM, and ensure the country stays in said party’s hands by appealing to younger voters. Through a concerted effort between government officials and bongo flava singers, the term “bongo flava” today has come to represent a music that aims to be the showcase of Tanzanian excellence, with CCM at the helm. Politically, it represents a cultural monopoly on how popular music describes the country and its leaders. If the difference between bongo flava and Tanzanian hip hop is the ways in which each genre represents the political realities of life in Tanzania, social media is one of the major spaces outside the music where these realities are articulated. Bongo flava culture is the bridge between young Tanzanians, who hold the future of their country in their politics and their votes, and CCM, who, like any political party, wishes to stay in power and articulate their specific vision of Tanzania.

**Tanzanian Publics Online**

Any kind of culture, on social media or otherwise, relies on interactions between people in order for said culture to exist and thrive. Before discussing bongo flava culture online, it is crucial to map out the parameters of social media more generally. Previous literature of space and publics can help define what the culture of bongo flava is online, and how it is so influential. Early understandings of social media turned to Habermas and the "public sphere" to work to theorize what exactly was going on when users came online and interacted with each other. Understandably, even critical approaches to the public sphere failed to completely articulate the social aspect of social media. On the one hand, without limitations of physical space, social media is incredibly accessible, and has a very low barrier to entry. On the other hand, social media is not an egalitarian marketplace of ideas, and has hierarchies that differ based on the specific space one is in. What are the social rules here, and what spaces do we mean when we say "here"? It is more useful to consider the world of social media to be made up of public spaces, or publics, rather than understand it as a cohesive, singular space where all users interact. Theoretical arguments about publics also provide more insight into the machinations of social media than just a concept of the public sphere. Nancy Fraser, in her critique of Habermas' original ideas, argues for understanding real life social activity to be stratified into a "plurality of competing publics," which, based on various identities and social capital are sorted through inter-public and intra-public hierarchies (Fraser 1990: 66). Social media can be understood in a similar, yet distinct way. Smaller publics, like certain interest groups on specific social media apps, have their own hierarchies, but then are categorized by a hirearchy within said app; there are also individual hierarchies of social media apps in general, which then collectively contribute to a rough mainstream understanding of the organization of social media in general. For

example, Clubhouse, where I met my first interlocutors for my fieldwork, can be considered to be lower in said hirearchy than an app like Twitter, which has both a larger user base and considered to be more important to more people. This mapping of social media hierarchy is far from comprehensive, but is important to remember as we discuss specific landscapes of social media from the lens of bongo flava culture.

Michael Warner's idea of a counterpublic also becomes useful in understanding hierarchies of social media. Counterpublics, by definition, are "defined by their tension with a larger public," and often describe publics made up of citizens whose ideas, lifestyles, or very existences are at odds with the larger, more mainstream public spheres (Warner 2010: 56). These publics can be critical of power, or not, and can be composed of "subaltern" citizens or not; Warner describes the example of "youth-culture publics," as operating like a counterpublic, "even though many who participate in them are 'subalterns' in no other sense" (Warner: 57). In any event, membership in these publics is not fixed, but increased participation in them distances one's identity from what is dominant in a society. Thus, "participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed" (Warner: 121). Warner's overall point was to shed more light into how queer or other marginalized spaces operate in juxtaposition with more mainstream publics. However, the idea of a counterpublic is effective at describing online spaces that define and operate outside of mainstream discourse. Instagram accounts and chatrooms dedicated to online hip hop, like Fivara's online presence described at the beginning of this essay, can be considered outside of what is mainstream in Tanzanian online media. Some may argue that these spaces can actually critique said mainstream discourse, but this claim is dubious at best. Online, there is a space for artists to intellectually critique the actions of the government and mainstream bongo flava artists. However, the strength of their

critiques is limited by their marginalization – artists at the fringes of acceptance into larger discourse are not seen as threatening, because very few people are participating in discussing them. Conversely, this is why it is so crucial for the biggest and most central artists in Tanzanian social media publics to be publicly supportive of CCM during elections.

Additionally, Warner's analysis of how a public is formed helps us identify what is and is not a public. He describes specific parameters for outlining a public, for example, a public is self-organized, and is made up of relations amongst strangers. These aspects help delineate the public sphere from the private home or the apparatus of the state. However, perhaps the most important distinction Warner makes, and one that is most useful for understanding social media publics is the distinction that "a public space is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (Warner: 90). Without reflexivity of discourse, where it is understood, altered, and then passed along, there is no public – text without a reader does not have a public element to it. This is the "social" of social media –information is created with an understanding that it will contribute to a certain discourse, and thus the reading of said information, along with additional contributions, make up the circulation described in Warner's definition. A text that is widely circulated both implies its inherent value (broadly defined) and is imbued with additional value through said circulation. As Timothy Taylor notes on his reading of Gabriel Tarde: "circulation *creates* value"; I am using value in a nebulous way here but on social media it can mean anything from the value of having a "viral" post to that kind of circulation creating financial capital for its owner (Taylor 2020: 259). This value is only contingent on a circulation within a specific public, a widely circulated tweet in one social media public may be worthless in another one. However, as long as a public creates and circulates information reflexively, it exists. This is why writing in a personal journal online cannot be considered a social act, but a blog

post, with an intended audience of a specific public, constitutes a kind of circulation. Online, and everywhere else, publics are spaces with blurry boundaries, that can disappear and be re-shaped at a moment's notice. They are at once as unfixed but powerful as any network of social relations.

The introduction of the smartphone in Tanzania had massive implications for creation and participation in online publics. Many, if not most Tanzanians who access the internet do it with a smartphone. Smartphones are easier to distribute and sell than the pricier personal computer. They also utilize an already in-place system of cellular service, and can access the internet through data usage, which is more reliable and widespread than Wifi. Additionally, cell phones running off battery power means that an uneven electrical infrastructure is not a hindrance to internet access. Cellphones without internet access have also functioned as debit cards since 2008. Major communications companies in the country, such as Vodacom or Airtel, provide customers with the ability to pay for goods and services though a system called M-Pesa, where one can utilize an account held with the cellular provider to give money to a corresponding vendor's account. Nowadays, one can pay for nearly anything or pay nearly anyone with an account with one of the three or four major communications companies. I mention this because this cements the daily use of cell phones into regular life in Tanzania, and makes the adoption of a smartphone, for many users who have the ability and financial means to purchase one, easy.

Achille Mbembe, in a 2016 interview titled "Afrocomputation," explains that for many people throughout the continent of Africa, the cell phone "is not only a means of communication. It is also a way to give yourself a style and to stand out. People spend a lot of time with it. It has

become an extension of being, a container for our lives which, in turn, gives them shape"[15] (Mbembe 2016). The cell phone being an extension of one's being is not only a phenomenon limited to the continent of Africa. However, his insistence here of the transformative properties of the cell phone throughout Africa further expand on social media, accessed through the phone, as an extension of oneself in their community. However, as previously stated, there is a difference in the inhabitants of an online space or community and their real-life counterparts. Mbembe, further on the in the interview, notes, "the kind of public space that the Internet helps to create can be very evanescent, very ephemeral. It's a rough public space, very different from the one Habermas had in mind. It's not always the empire of reason" (Mbembe 2017). Habermas' original conception of the public sphere was constructed with an understanding that conversations involving a common interest were facilitated by the fact that these conversations were conducted amongst citizens of equal class (i.e. bourgeois). The spaces these conversations happened in were physical and permanent, often coffee shops or Masonic lodges, and discourse was intentionally conducted with equal weight to either side of said discourse. The public spheres on the Internet, in comparison, operate very differently, as Mbembe argues. The ephemeral nature of publics is an obvious difference; another major change is the anonymity of participants in online discourse. Profiles and biographies can be falsified, so in fact the only identifying feature for many users is the content and discourse they produce. One's way of interacting with the larger conversation becomes one's identity online, in lieu of more traditional identifying topics.

These drastically altered interactions amongst members of society online mean that politics conducted online has to be understood differently than its previous, physical iterations.

[15] This, and all other quotes from the 2016 interview have been translated from the original French into English.

One such difference that hasn't been discussed is the muddying of the difference between facts and opinions online. Anyone who has spent any time reading the opinions of political actors online can empirically confirm this fact. Mbembe, too, artfully describes this unavoidable fact in the following paragraph:

> To some extent, the new digital world has led to a deep dislocation of language…today, the means of dissemination have intensified and the confusion between what is true and what is false has reached new levels. In this area of affect, the easiest way to mobilize people is to simplify everything, to downplay what we used to call "the facts," to be the engineers of the scandal, to stigmatize. The tone of such performances is very evangelical. Most of the time, it's opinion against opinion. There is no way out of it without face-to-face meetings. Face-to-face, real bodies, real assemblies are absolutely central in politics…we cannot confuse means and ends. The Internet is a means, not an end. But these days, it no longer seems to matter that a just cause is served by questionable means. Rather, we are led to believe that the means are the end, that winning is all that matters, and that the winner is always right (Mbembe 2017).

This is one of the major issues in understanding politics within and via social media. The internet can never be a replacement for political activity, but it is one of the major spaces in which political ideology is circulated. With the ability for nearly everyone online to participate in a conversation about a certain topic, there is little that stops the conversation from, as Mbembe argues, to become a war of opinions. Whether the leaders of CCM understand this explicitly or not, they get that at some level, political decision making is highly personalized and emotional. Nobody votes unemotionally. Therefore, by identifying their political party online with a brand of culture that many young people feel positively about (bongo flava), they are able to win support from a demographic they desperately need to stay in power.

**Monopolizing Bongo Flava Media**

All of this begs the question: how does CCM achieve this monopoly of culture online? One of the major reasons this enterprise is successful is because the borders of bongo flava

culture are intentionally nebulous. In fact, it is easy to confuse anything remotely relating to young people as technically falling under the umbrella of bongo flava. Bongo flava was and continues to be *kizazi kipya,* or "the new generation"; the same can be said about social media, as early adopters and savvy users often are younger people. It is appealing for young people to go online and see their favorite artists and celebrities live flashy lives. However, what is perhaps most appealing about social media to young people is its "social" aspect, where one can discuss these lives, posts, videos, and pictures with friends and strangers. Social media by itself invites discussion and interaction, but it is, as Geertz argues, the circulation of discourse that makes it a culture. As previously stated – what counts as qualified discourse varies significantly in bongo flava online – a lot of bongo flava media is news and news commentary sites, sharing certain songs or actions by celebrities. However, media houses like Wasafi.FM, which is owned by Diamond Platnumz, are intended to be a "one-stop-shop" of sorts for an average young Tanzanian's media consumption. For example, as seen in Figure 2: is a report on a recent boxing match part of said culture? It has nothing to do with the music, but is reported on by Wasafi Sports, and is discussed and shared in Swahili. One could argue this is just the Tanzanian, and by extension, Swahili social media world. However, this news being presented to us through the same media outlet that produces some of the top bongo flava songs complicates this assertion a bit more.


*Figure 4.2: Wasafi Post about boxing match between Dylan White and Alexander Potevkin, June 2020*

For media houses like Wasafi, then, everything from a minor celebrity's outfit to significant world news is fair game to present to its audience and have its audience discuss,

through comments, circulation to other users, and interactions like "likes" on Instagram. This expansion of "relevant" discourse, beyond what is strictly relevant to bongo flava music, is perhaps fueled by a need for engagement with posts. Social media accounts often leverage said engagement and followers with advertisers, in order to demonstrate their corner of the internet is a profitable one for ads. This business model, then, motions to Dallas Smythe's assertation that mass media is designed to both "mass market the mass-produced consumer goods and services generated by monopoly capitalism by using audience power to accomplish this end," and then to use this audience power to sell the "legitimacy of the state" (Smythe 2012: 233). This idea, audience power, he argues "is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity," so, as a commodity, it is produced by labor (Smythe: 233). The concept that circulating discourse through means of online discussions, reposts, and likes is akin to labor in the Marxist sense is tenuous; then again, Marx and Engels could not have possibly conceived of Instagram targeted advertising. However, in the world of bongo flava, there is a public relationship between the online culture of this music and the Tanzanian government, and so here Smythe's assertion that mass media legitimizes the state has a literal analog. Social media allows us to track the ways these two parties work


*Figure 4.3: Announcement for census event on Diamond's Twitter.*

together to put out a comprehensive vision of the Tanzanian state.

One example is this Twitter post on Diamond's account from September of 2021. This is an announcement of an event in Dodoma that is meant to spread awareness about the government census and strategy for housing in the future. To attract citizens to what may have been a less exciting event, the Tanzanian government has asked Diamond to show up to it. On the surface, putting bongo stars on the poster for an event like this guarantees that more people will look at it. However, there is a deeper connection to be made about why the Tanzanian state is willing to work with bongo stars for their events. Education level in general in Tanzania is extremely variable, and there is a significant portion of the population that never finishes secondary school. One can surmise, then, that political education amongst the population remains similarly variable. However, bongo flava is played on every radio station, and its music videos are streamed on every smartphone in the country. Young people develop a relationship with these stars long before they hear about their local political representative. They may not even know how the government works besides for the election of the president. But, they know about bongo flava, and this makes an otherwise unknowable and obtuse government approachable and understandable.

However, as van Dijck argues, Twitter is not an egalitarian space, but rather "a public dialogue ruled by a small number of hyper-connected influencers skilled at handling large numbers of followers" (van Dijck 2013: 74). Furthermore, the architecture of Twitter "privileges certain influential users who can increase tweet volume, and whom thus garner more followers" (van Dijck: 74). Twitter, then, is an extremely advantageous platform for a party like CCM who can 1) attract a large number of followers and 2) create connections with high-ranking influencers on the site to better promote their own ideologies. Despite its associations with

revolutionary actions such as the Arab Spring in 2014, Twitter is more useful for maintaining autocratic control of a population or country than it is for engendering any kind of liberating force. Given what we know about how certain tweets and ideas are boosted in Twitter's algorithm, relationships between bongo flava stars and CCM political actors are nearly inevitable.

In spite of the realities of the architecture of social media, many of these sites have been heralded in the public imagination as a place where everyone has a say, and everyone has a platform for their ideas. This is somewhat true in the context of independent musicians, who no longer have to go through media houses or traditional promotion avenues to spread the word about their music. This is also somewhat true in that most posts create a "public" of sorts, in that they are designed to create discourse. When Michael Warner argues for a public to be defined as a readership of a specific text, for example, one can find real examples in the comments sections of social media posts. It is in these spaces that there can be elements of political discourse, especially if the original post deals with government entities. For example, in 2021, six artists from Tanzania were nominated for the AFRIMMA[16] awards, and in October of that

*Figure 4.4: Simulizinasauti.com reporting on Samia's recognition of six bongo flava artists.*

[16] From AFRIMMA.com: "African Muzik Magazine Awards (AFRIMMA) is the sole award ceremony in Diaspora that caters to all musical genres including but not limited to Afrobeats, Assiko, Bongo, Decale, Funana, Genge, Highlife, Kwaito, Lingala and Soukous"

year, President Samia congratulated them in a speech during a ceremony that was announcing the launch of the country's development campaign to help fight COVID-19. The reporting on this event by social media site Simulizinasauti.com constitutes, as Warner argued, a text about this event, and in this text, a public can be formed. The comments section of this specific post was intriguing, if only because of the ways it featured different attitudes towards government involvement in the nation's musical exploits. One notable omission from this list was Harmonize, and many comments under this post thought said omission was quite funny. User @ilypayne23 wrote "Kaah sasa harmonize yuko wap

Tanzania, BASATA, and includes the comment "muone aibu basi nchi inawasanii nguli ila hakuna tuzo why?" [*you should be ashamed, then the country is making great artists, but there is no award, why?*]. Here, this user is wondering if these Tanzanian artists are worthy of such praise, then why doesn't Tanzania actually praise them instead of an organization in the US? Finally, we can see user @grande_solee write the comment "Tuzo za CCM," or "CCM awards," referencing that all of these artists have been hospitable to CCM in the past, which could mean performing at their rallies, posting on the party's behalf online, or, in some cases, writing songs in praise of CCM candidates. There is no conclusive evidence as to the exact details and specifics of the relationships between CCM and top bongo flava artists, and implications that CCM candidates have participated in things like ballot stuffing during elections is vehemently denied by the party. These accounts, similar to underground rappers who also critique CCM, are simply too small and insignificant for the party to take any serious action against them. Larger and more popular figures have gotten slaps on the wrist for similar online acts in the past, but general comments like these are usually not perceived as a threat. For some citizens on social media, instances like these further cement the idea that the government's activity on social media, alongside bongo flava, is an elaborate mechanism designed to suppress critique and monopolize culture in Tanzania.

*Figure 4.5: Zuchu posts on Instagram about President Samia's vaccination on July 28, 2021*

This synergy between bongo flava artists and CCM is not always a bad thing, however. While Diamond

Platnumz seems to only do what is financially best for his brand, other artists come across online as being more genuine and having more agency, at least publicly. Zuchu is one such artist. The daughter of Taarab singer Khadija Kopa, Zuchu is a Zanzibari pop singer whose sound is on the cutting edge of bongo flava music, while retaining a vocal style that very much displays her mother's influence. Her success is also significant in that she remains one of the few women in an industry and musical culture that is very much male dominated. Her public support of President Hassan is perhaps in recognition of the fact that Zuchu and Samia Hassan are similar as being in primarily male-dominated fields. In the months after she took office, President Hassan worked to promote the public's acceptance of vaccines for Covid-19, which represented a clear break from the previous administration's stance on the virus and a commitment to taking pandemic measures seriously. However, in a country with relatively low Covid numbers (officially speaking), it was initially quite difficult to get people to take the vaccine, for a variety of reasons. Like many other world leaders, President Hassan went and got vaccinated publicly, to dissuade fearmongers about the vaccine and show that it is good and safe to receive. Zuchu, in this Instagram post, is lauding her leadership saying, in English, that "a true leader leads by example." In the caption below this title, she calls herself a young patriot and happily supports the efforts of her president. Whether or not this was a supported post by the government is impossible to know. More likely than not, this put Zuchu in the good graces of the president, inoculating her from controversy if she ever puts out music or content that is incompatible with CCM's conservative views of what Tanzanian media should be.

However, this post no longer exists. I took this screenshot from my personal Instagram account on the day it was posted in 2021. A scroll through Zuchu's Instagram feed confirms that it is gone, along with the comments and likes associated with it. The ephemeral nature of a photo

feed on Instagram intentionally makes it a poor archive. For anyone who wanted to remember this post by Zuchu supporting the president's vaccination campaign: they can only rely on individually taken screenshots or just the memories of other people who saw and discussed the post. This aspect of the website is similar to Flickr, which predated the launch of Instagram by six years and influenced many features we find on the app. Specifically in describing Flickr's "Photostream," where users could constantly upload new pictures to their account, Nancy Van House argues that "Flickr was keen to be perceived as a constantly evolving pictorial database, which never fossilizes into a stable archive (van Dijck: 92). Political discourse on social media, then, is perhaps by design ahistorical, and so it makes it quite easy for anyone to contribute to revisions to history that are inaccessible or deleted. When Mbembe talks about how discourse online is "opinion against opinion," it is partially because there is no scoreboard or historical record on social media. Anyone can say anything they want, and barely anyone remembers what happened two weeks prior online. Large political actors like CCM thrive online because they can constantly rewrite their own narratives as the need arises. As social media becomes more of a part of politics in Tanzania, and more citizens have access to sites like Twitter and Instagram, political parties like CCM will continue to refine and perfect their strategies of marketing themselves online. With the willing assistance of the country's top pop musicians, it is easy to conceptualize how effective these strategies are, and will become.

**Political Performance in Bongo Flava**

In the early days of my research, when I was mostly conducting online ethnography, I often asked myself: what should I catalogue? How much of the experience of being online in this world was scrolling through, reading the posts and opinions of the day? What is important enough to be saved for later, potentially because it could be erased from the Internet? This is an

issue that nearly every archivist has grappled with; however, the sheer amount of content that is created online makes the work of any digital archivist, professional or amateur, means this question is more important than ever before. I often tried to gather my materials with an idea of what my research goals were, filtering the daily feed with names of certain celebrities or mentions of CCM or other political parties. The overall effect of reading daily news and consuming bongo flava content is what guided the majority of my cataloguing of this online culture. Through careful study of recent bongo flava music made in direct support of CCM, one can further understand the overall messaging of CCM online, and why they remain so popular in every election.[18] Ultimately, the true relationship between these parties is unknowable, mostly because it is near impossible to get everyone involved to speak truthfully on the matter. However, this chapter is not interested in the truth of this relationship; rather, it is more important to catalogue and understand the public facing, political performance that is articulated by bongo flava content. The following example catalogues the public demonstration of Harmonize with the late President Magufuli, utilizing a music video that is ostensibly a propaganda piece.

In 2019, bongo flava star Harmonize released the song and music video for "Magufuli." The name referred to the president at the time, John Pombe Magufuli, who died in 2021 after heart complications caused by a COVID-19 infection.[19] The song and accompanying music video serves as an interesting archival text for bongo flava fans, not only because of the content

[18] This popularity is not completely organic, however. Every time there is an election, reports of unfair election practices, such as ballot stuffing and voter intimidation, circulate in local news. It is likely that these methods also contribute significantly to CCM's popularity, election year after election year.

[19] A personal take on Magufuli's death is that his heart complications were heavily stressed in order to minimize the effects of COVID-19 on the president's health. This is because one of Magufuli's defining leadership attributes was that he did not believe that COVID-19 was a serious threat to the health and safety of Tanzanians, and did not share or track significant infection data with the WHO during his time as president.

within the media but also the conversation and aftermath of the song's release. The production is a copy of the production on Harmonize's hit "Kwa Ngwaru," which came out earlier the same year. Produced by longtime collaborator Lizer Classic, the song contains a bouncy bassline that moves through a IV-V-I major chord progression. The original song's lyrics are standard bongo flava fare, with declarations of love and devotion to an unnamed woman. In the remake, this love and devotion turns to patriotism and support of Magufuli. For example, the song starts out with the cascading lines of praise: "I wish ningemwona Magufuli / Nipige magoti / Nimpongeze hadharani / Yaani Raaise wa muungano wa Jamhuri / mchapakazi hachoki / Anaye pinga nani?" [*(I wish I could see Magufuli / I would get on my knees / and congratulate him in public / That is, the President of the Union of the Republic / A hard worker who never gets tired / who can compare against him?*] (Harmonize 2019). Notably, Harmonize mentions Magufuli's work ethic here, which for many politicians is a sign of respect, but also can be understood as a reference the government's (and CCM's) motto, "kazi inaendelee," or "the work continues." This ideology creates a narrative about Tanzanian that not only is in progress but also requires a leader to play an active role in the work to improve Tanzania. In a sense, this creates consent amongst Tanzanians that the government needs to play an active role in the media they consume, as there is "work to do." The active synergy of CCM and bongo stars is once again provided cultural context through this paradigm.

*Figure 4.6: Harmonize in front of the Air Tanzania airplane in the "Magufuli" video*

While Harmonize opens with lyrics that are a bit more abstract, he quickly goes into specifics that almost read like a campaign speech. In the same verse, he praises a flyover road built in Dar es Salaam, the addition of an Airbus Bombardier to the Air Tanzania fleet, and how the government has built more standard gauge railways throughout the country. He even includes the line "Umeme, maji kero zimepungua," saying that generally in the country, electricity and water problems have decreased under Magufuli (Harmonize 2019). The music video is appropriately patriotic, with Harmonize dressed in Tanzanian colors complete with his Wasafi Records chain and accompanying jewelry. However, cut between the shots of Harmonize singing to the camera are shots of Magufuli on the campaign trail, at various government events, and even a few dancing, with the implication that he was "dancing" to the song the viewer is hearing at the moment. The overall effect of the video really presents Magufuli as the people's champion, a universally loved leader who is looking to follow up his first term with a resounding success in his second. This overt praise of the sitting president, especially one who was controversial in his handling of freedoms of speech and critique in the country, is not a particularly new phenomenon. However, the release of this music video marked an interesting period in Harmonize's career and Magufuli's involvement with bongo flava.

The "Magufuli" video was released in early August of 2019, and in October of that same year, Magufuli endorsed Harmonize for a seat in parliament. According to multiple newspaper reports, "Mr Magufuli's blessing came after Harmonize entertained him at a rally" (The East African: 2019). At the time, this vote of confidence was surprising to many, specifically because Magufuli had previously gone after label mates Diamond and Rayvanny for indecent content in their music, as stated at the beginning of this essay. To the public, the exchange was clear: if you praised the government, you could get away with things that are technically "against the rules."

Another interesting point about the Magufuli/Harmonize partnership is that around the time the song "Magufuli" was released, Harmonize was locked in a bitter contract dispute with Diamond, who was refusing to let Harmonize leave his label without paying a sum of roughly $10,000 USD to Diamond. Rumors speculate that Magufuli actually helped Harmonize with this significant sum of money, which would explain the timing of the song's release. Weeks after Magufuli's untimely death in April of 2021, Harmonize took to Instagram to show off his latest tattoo: a portrait of Magufuli's face with the caption "R.I.P. KAMANDA." Once again, regardless of the truth between these two, the public is presented with an overly patriotic superstar and a respectable, strong leader. It doesn't matter that Magufuli's leadership was one that did not accept anything besides what Harmonize was doing, or that other artists who stood against Magufuli were targeted and interrogated. Through a public performance of patriotism, CCM is able to model the ideal citizen and attitude towards the government.

Attitudes towards the current president are no less gracious and fawning amongst bongo flava artists, both elite and upcoming. Shortly after her inauguration, Diamond came out with the song "Samia Suhulu," which features the refrain "Tanzania ya Mama Samia, ina ngara ngara," or "Mother Samia's Tanzania is bright" (Diamond Platnumz: 2021). If you search Spotify for the song "Mama Samia," you'll find that there are at least five other songs by the same name, from Tanzanian artists, that feature the president's portrait on the cover. One of these is performed by the Jahazi Modern Taarab band, indicating that the rush to appeal to the new president wasn't limited to bongo flava artists exclusively. Some of these smaller artists are probably not going to be invited to become a member of parliament, or will not even be acknowledged by CCM or the Tanzanian government at all. They are, however, just as complicit in creating the paradigm that forces Tanzania's public facing musical culture to remain praiseful of the president, or else face

varyingly dire consequences, depending on who's in power. By all metrics, President Hassan is not the ruthless autocrat that Magufuli was when it comes to freedoms of speech and expression. But, she is a CCM party member, and so, early in her presidency, she suspended the printing and distribution of a newspaper that ran a "false story saying that President Samia Suluhu Hassan would not vie for office in 2025" (Reuters: 2021). Furthermore, until very recently in January 2023, she did not lift the ban on opposition party rallies in Tanzania instated under Magufuli's presidency, which was extended once President Hassan took power. From casual conversations about her work to various articles and social media posts, there is a sense that while her presidency is a return to political decorum in Tanzania, she will not deviate significantly from CCM's history of suppressing critique.

**Conclusion**

Without social media, bongo flava culture does not exist as it does today. Not only has it been identified as an effective way for young people to keep track of their favorite artists and celebrities, but it also provides CCM with a conduit to reach young voters. Connecting with other people on social media often helps create a community of bongo flava fans, and this discourse can be identified as kind of online public, to utilize Michael Warner's definition. The availability of cell phones throughout Tanzania, and Africa more generally, engenders this discourse to be wide-ranging in scope and fundamentally changes the way people connect with political ideology. Thus, online discourse can easily be adopted and co-opted by CCM when it becomes necessary to reach young people for attendance in events and votes. Sometimes, this co-optation seems ordinary, with bongo flava celebrities applauding government officials on social media, or showing up at in-person events. Other times, we see the music and culture of bongo flava become overt propaganda for the ruling party in Tanzania. These public acts of loyalty to

CCM are extremely effective in recruiting and maintaining a loyal voter base. However, more importantly, by shaping the way young people understand their government and their popular culture, CCM can additionally create a version of life in Tanzania that is always going to be partial to the party.

## Chapter V:
## Performing Masculinity in Tanzanian Popular Music and Politics

### Introduction

While I was conducting interviews with various rappers I met through Sanaa Kwa Manufaa, I made the silent observation that an overwhelming majority of my interviewees were men. It wasn't until a specific event in Mtwara, however, that made me hyper aware of how much the culture of hip hop in Tanzania was influenced by iterations of masculinity in the country. On the second day of these seminars, the artist attending said seminar would shoot a music video, over a song which had been previously recorded as a posse cut. The songs ran long, well over five minutes, since ten artists were on each one. The music video in Mtwara was shot on a lesser used street near the beach on the outskirts of town, with the artists lined up across the road, and what looked to be a small hanger or industrial building in the background. The shoot was set up so that the rappers could rap over the song they had recorded; with the song playing off someone's phone over a Bluetooth speaker. During one of the first takes, the song was abruptly paused, and to the hilarity of the rest of the group, it was because the owner of the phone's girlfriend had rung him, asking where he was. The rest of the group laughed, almost like a group of high schoolers, at the recipient politely telling his girlfriend he was at a music video and would call her back later. Immediately, the tone of the music video shifted, and what began as a bit of a stilted, awkward affair turned into a more relaxed session. This small incident reminded me how much of an implicit bias there was in this culture towards masculinity and the experiences of men. In some cases, it is inclusionary: every person at the shoot reacted to this call with recognition (as if they had actually or pretending to have had been in this situation before). This inclusionary aspect, however, was facilitated by the fact that everyone at the shoot

*Figure 5.1: Screenshot from 2022 Mtwara Cypher Music Video*

was a man. However, the inclusionary aspect of this group by definition excludes others who have not been in this situation. If the group of artists weren't all heterosexual young men, one would assume that the universality of this incident being funny would have been more questioned. I remember coming away from that music video with a much stronger sense of understanding just how much masculinity is implicit in these artists lives.

However patriarchal hip hop or bongo flava may seem, musical cultures on their own, if such a thing could even exist independently and not embedded in a larger society, are not inherently gendered. I begin with this to make the point that hip hop, for example, is not patriarchal – it just so happens that patriarchal societies created, supported, and altered hip hop since its existence. Focusing on the root causes of things like patriarchy can keep one from mistaking musical cultures as having inherent societal values. Or, to put it another way, I'd like to foreground this chapter with an important aphorism that may or may not be attributed to Tim Taylor: Music doesn't do anything; people do. Tanzanian hip hop and bongo flava both create versions of masculinity that are attractive and powerful, even if some songs, or some artists, or even some iterations of either musical culture subvert traditional gender norms in Tanzania. Up to this point, the previous chapters have outlined political intersections within the worlds of Tanzanian rap music and bongo flava. The stakes of these intersections have always been high

because while music itself cannot change the lived realities of citizens, the influence that music has on political actors can in fact be a specific agent of change. However, like in bongo flava and Tanzanian hip hop, the gender of said political actors is deeply crucial to the way authority can be administered in Tanzania.

I would like to consider the effectiveness of political power through the lens of age and gender in the relationships between bongo flava stars, politicians, and rappers in Tanzania I argue, similar Ocobock's notion that colonial and post-colonial construction of the state through elder masculinity in Kenya, the political relationships between bongo flava, Tanzanian hip hop, and the state, are constructed through these same identifiers: age and gender. A young, masculine culture has been a constant identifier of hip hop and bongo flava culture from the beginnings of both genres, and so in these cultures, the rule of gerontocracy is not as prevalent. However, as artists in both of these genres have historically articulated versions of political reality, they have had to reckon with the elder state as a way to earn legitimacy. This chapter will outline what versions of masculinity are prevalent in bongo flava and Tanzanian hip hop, and how these masculinities adjust themselves to the elder Tanzanian state. Ultimately, I argue that the success of artists in these genres is in no small part related to how successfully they can adapt to and negotiate ideal masculinity in muscial cultural spaces. These adaptations, in turn, can help an artist endear themselves to the government, and earn them real political power.

**Performances of Masculinity in Bongo Flava**

Gender and politics are rarely, if ever, separated. In her introduction to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler opens with defining feminism in relation to the oppression of women, and argues for a more political (i.e. pragmatic and constructed) understanding of what a woman is in society. Namely, she makes the salient point that the "system" (which we can read as a patriarchal

society) has produced gendered differences between people, and "an uncritical appeal to such a system for the emancipation of 'women' will be clearly self-defeating" (Butler 1999: 5). This is a deeply significant, yet somewhat general overview of feminist thought and theory, and arguably the history of feminist theory post Judith Butler has been the constant asking of which women, which system, and what kind of emancipation we are talking about. Butler's assertion in this book that gender is in fact a construction, and a performance, is an important foundation for any disucssion of gender, especially here, in the performance of masculine identity in Tanzania. Miles White notes that "writing about masculinity arguably favors a gender position already privileged in many ways," and yet, if one is to understand systems of power that are based in patriarchal ideals, one cannot ignore masculine gender constructions (White 2011: 2). White's work is helpful here in that it outlines performances of black masculinity in hip hop specifically, even if the historical politics of said masculinity in the United States (much of which he artfully connects to the history of blackface minstrelsy) are less applicable in a Tanzanian context. However, White also argues "since minstrelsy, blackness has been one of America's primary cultural exports," and in a discussion of the ways ideal masculinity is depicted in bongo flava and hip hop, one must recognize the cultural homage of these representations to be rooted in blackness, an American cultural concept (White 2011: 30). These masculine performances, in videos, in commercials, even in the ethos of work ethic all borrow and "domesticate" (to use Prestholdt's term) understandings of black masculinity from the United States. The two genres mentioned here arguably are successful at mixing these depictions of blackness with local political histories and homegrown understandings of what it means to be an ideal man.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Paul Ocobock argues that in colonial and post-colonial Kenya, political power was administered through a gerontocratic, masculine rule that he called

the "elder state." In Kenya, this produced a political rift between elder male politicians and politically mobile, socially active young people in the new country. Priya Lal, in her disucssion of ujamaa, notes that Nyerere's initial vision of Tanzania aimed to organize the country to operate like a family unit. Here, too, there is a split between the elders of the state, which could be considered the government and smaller reigonal governments, and its "children," which could be understood as the smaller units of social organization. Even past the Tanzanian state, the "only logical conclusion for true socialism" was a communal society that operated and self-governed like a family unit (Lal 2017: 32). As Tanzania is a patriarchal society that still is governed by a gerontocracy, it is easy to see connections between the historical elder state in Kenya, the ujamaa family unit, and the relationship between Tanzania and its constituents today. However, the real political power within bongo flava complicates this historical understanding of the elder state. Tanzanian hip hop and bongo flava are enjoyed and produced primarily by young men, so while the patriarchal parameters of the greater Tanzanian society remain in these genres, power and success is not necessarily achieved through posing as an elder. However, as we will see in the following examples, the only way to obtain and maintain political leadership remains through a performance of elder masculinity.

*Figure 5.2: Diamond Platnumz Pepsi Max ad from 2022; Diamond has been a brand ambassador for Pepsi since 2019*

In bongo flava, a youthful, virile masculinity is the platonic ideal. One cannot make a career in bongo flava by only being attractive; however, without a baseline of good looks, one cannot be successful in the industry.

In many of the top bongo stars' music videos, the lead singer often appears shirtless; in Dar es Salaam today, it is difficult to drive for a long time without seeing a Pepsi advertisement with Diamond Platnumz on it, shirtless, and often with his jewelry on. To the average young person, images like Figure 1 represent both an aspirational ideal for men, and an object of desire for women. Bongo flava culture operates upon assumed notions of heterosexuality; homosexuality is officially illegal in Tanzania, and many gay men "experience pressure from family and society to perform gender following a set of conventional norms" (Shio and Moyer 2021: 858). Notably, Tanzania has been under notice from worldwide human rights organizations due to their official persecution of gay men in particular. This is to say, bongo flava sexual mores do not consider the possibility of non-heterosexuality as being legitimate.

One can look to song lyrics, music videos, and album covers for significant evidence of the type of masculinity bongo flava seeks to champion. An oft-cited controversial 2018 song by Rayvanny and Diamond, called "Mwanza," features the refrain "ehh nyege nyege/ Kwetu Mwanza nyegezi / Hmmm nyege nyege / Nishushe Mwanza Nyegezi" [*Ehh I am horny, Here in Mwanza at Nyegezi Bus Stop / Hmm I am horny / Drop me at the Mwanza Nyegezi Bus Stop*] (Rayvanny 2018). While this song was swiftly sanctioned by the arts governing body in Tanzania, BASATA, for sexually explicit lyrics, said lyrics are common in the ways bongo flava singers pursue women in their songs. Another example could be found in Rayvanny's "Tetema," featuring the lines like "You like me, I like you (Tetema) / You wan me girl I want you (Tetema)" and "Bad mmh wickedest / And the way you whine gal you finish it" (Rayvanny 2021). Sometimes, the purpose of these pursuits is more traditional, as we can see in the 2018 Diamond song with Ne-Yo "Marry You," which features Diamond singing on the chorus "I want to marry you / Tuende [Let's go to] Mama na Papa" (Platnumz 2018). Or, in Harmonize's 2022

song “Wote,” we can hear the singer croon “I wish tuzeeke wote / I wish tuzikwe mmoja akifa kesho,” [*I wish for us to grow old, I wish we were both buried if one of us dies tomorrow*] in a chorus reminiscent of the Shakespearean story of Romeo and Juliet (Harmonize 2022). There are literally thousands of songs that span the spectrum of masculine lust and love in bongo flava, but all focus their attention on who is usually an unnamed, beautiful woman. This, of course, is not the only popular music genre who creates a one-dimensional view of women. However, the similarities between popular musics worldwide in their specific diminishing of a woman from the male perspective is a reflection on how embedded patriarchal ideals are in said socities, and not necessarily a critique of the kind of music that is often marketed as popular. However, in the culture of bongo flava, women are as prizes to be won, and brides to be cherished. Deviations from this norm must be strategic, or else they carry no cultural or political weight.

Bongo flava music videos further emphasize a type of young, attractive masculinity. As the naming of “bongo flava” was at a time where the genre was more aligned with hip hop music, many aesthetics from hip hop music videos carry over to bongo flava ones. Often, acted demonstrations of wealth, a practice originating from “bling bling” aesthetics in hip hop from the Southern US, are a key feature of bongo flava videos. This includes wearing big flashy chains, showing off luxury cars, entering or stepping out of expensive planes and houses, wearing expensive clothes, and literally showing off paper money. Similar to hip hop in the US, Tanzanian patriarchal culture has mapped itself quite significantly on to bongo flava culture, and the appearance of young, attractive men in bongo flava music videos specifically tells viewers what the ideal man should be. Men, if they are fully dressed, are usually outfitted with conspicuously expensive and well-fitting clothing. Jewelry and sunglasses are a must; and stylistically, the clothes often run the gambit from slightly altered European formalwear (i.e.

*Figure 5.3: Marioo in the "Naogopa" music video, in a clean red sweatsuit and a chain.*

suits), hip hop culture fashion (like sweatsuits), or more ostentatious clothes like loud printed shirts or flashy pants. Sometimes, as is common in music videos featuring members of Wasafi Records, the singer presents his shirtless physique to the viewer. To me, this, more than most aspects of these music videos, articulates what the "proper" and "successful" man should be. Physical health and muscle are equated to both the result of hard work, a tenet of bongo flava culture, and ideal masculinity, so that the women who are so often the objects of pursuit in these videos cannot help but be attracted to these singers. Music videos like "Naogopa" (2022), by Marioo featuring Harmonize, further flesh out the celebrity of these pop stars by demonstrating ways that these artists check the boxes of ideal masculinity.

Even women-led bongo flava songs cannot escape the trappings of how men are traditionally represented in these videos. A notable example is Zuchu's song "Fire," which came out under Wasafi

*Figure 5.4: Harmonize, shirtless, in the "Naogopa" video.*

*Figure 5.5: Zuchu in the "Fire" video, 2022*

Records in 2022. In many ways, Zuchu is performing the aesthetic of the ideal man in this video. The lyrics are classic bongo flava pop, in that Zuchu is describing how much she loves (in both the lustful and romantic senses of the word) an unnamed man. Zuchu wears a number of outfits throughout the song, all seemingly influenced by both traditional styles in Tanzania (such as the kanga skirt in Figure 6) and hip hop culture more generally (the glasses and green outfit in figure 5 being a notable example). Men do feature in this music video, similarly to how women feature in songs sung by men: as set pieces and backup dancers. Notably, the man in this video is also shirtless, and is the only person in the video in such a state of undress. Zuchu is a groundbreaking artist who is working to upend a significant tradition of male bongo flava singers, but even she is hemmed in by traditional aesthetic decisions in bongo flava. As a successful bongo flava star, there is a certain sartorial expectation of her. This is not to say she is being forced to dress a certain way, but rather I argue that being such a big part of bongo flava culture greatly informs her public facing persona, which includes the clothes she wears. This flipping of gender roles, while retaining the almost competitive desire for a member of the

*Figure 5.6: Zuchu and male dancer in "Fire" video, 2022*

opposite sex, is a common trope for women who seek to enter patriarchal music cultures. Many women in various hip-hop cultures, for example, have utilized a forward sexual nature to match the same energy one would find from male MC's in order to garner success in their genre. The success and popularity of bongo flava culture ensures that its representation of ideal masculinity is well known and widespread. There are ways to gradually change this image, but generally speaking, the keys to financial success are to either perfectly adopt, or slightly alter, the ideal man in bongo flava culture.

**Masculinity as Performed Through Hard Work**

In addition to physical attractiveness, masculinity in Tanzania is also performed through the accumulation of money and financial success, most often mythologized through the idea of hard work. A belief in a culture of hustling has longstanding ties in the mythos of bongo flava. As previously mentioned, bongo flava originally referred to a lifestyle of hustling and street smarts that was required to survive in a city like Dar es Salaam, and more generally to the bongo mentality developed in the country during the early 1980s. Notably, during this period, "government salaries, decent health care, and an honest police force disappeared, [and] ingenuity took over as the dominant form of social welfare" (Perullo 2011: 8). This ingenuity often took the form of multiple streams of part-time income, or perhaps pursuing careers outside the law in order to make ends meet. It is easy to conceptualize why this version of hustling, of the bongo mentality, was and is so compatible with the progenitors of hip hop culture in Tanzania. Hip hop, as a worldwide phenomenon, inspires listeners and artists alike to make do with what they have; even in its origins in the South Bronx hip hop as a youth arts movement was essentially another form of ingenuity in direct response to abandonment by the state. The economic conditions under

which Tanzanian hip hop have improved slightly. However, even today, there is a sense that success in an urban center like Dar es Salaam is predicated on one's ability to work hard.

The culture of hip hop in Tanzania prioritizes a work ethic that which, if done correctly, is a performance of ideal masculinity. Attitudes like these are very reminiscent of other genres and iterations of hip hop worldwide, but in Tanzania, they have local precedents, such as the aforementioned connection between a culture of hustling in hip hop and the ujamaa era ideal of "self-reliance." However, the act of working hard as a man in Tanzania has a performed aspect to it. In his monograph on barbershop culture in Arusha, Brad Weiss discusses the rural idea of *kijiwe*, or "the little stone" (Weiss 2009: 80). This metonym generally refers to a life and practice of work that is hard and strenuous, but also represents something that survives, and endures through hardship. In this example, young men working at a barbershop consider their work to be *kijiwe*, but more significantly, the barbershop is one of a number of meeting places for men to socialize, work hard together, and form intimate social bonds. In many urban centers in Tanzania, there is a popular belief that financial success and social networking go hand in hand, so even by walking around and greeting friends and colleagues, one can be considered to be working towards an eventual financial or professional goal. This constant state of motion, of hustling, can easily be likened to original ideas of bongo in Dar es Salaam. The ability for young people to achieve this type of constant social contact through apps like Whatsapp has only increased the importance of this kind of performance. Further research on this could investigate the relative weight of social interactions online versus in person, which more likely than not are weighed on axes of age, class, and location (i.e. urban versus rural).

The congregation of young men in barbershop locations in Tanzania can be connected to a larger and more widespread practice of "waiting," which in broad terms has been a response by

many young people, mostly men, to the social and economic disruptions common in many African countries. Scholarship on youth culture in Africa, as well as the politics of waiting, has identified that practices that seem like sitting around, or waiting and networking with other young people, are actually specific political actions that are imbued with purpose and hope. As individuals, "waiting denotes the lived reality of being unable to attain markers of adulthood and respectability"; as young men in Tanzania, the idea of respectability is often equated with ideal masculine aspects from bongo flava culture, which include physical attractiveness and hard work (Dawson 2014: 868). However, amongst a community (such as the community of underground rappers in Tanzania), "waiting accounts for the impatience and discontent owing to the mismatch between the expectations placed on the state and the absent, inadequate, and uneven delivery of services and houses" (Dawson: 869). As a community, young people waiting around often are catalysts for social movements; in South Africa, the term for "youth" actually has the definition of "anyone engaged in 'unrest' – mainly young, black, unemployed men" (Dawson: 861-62). In Senegal, they are "imagined as the origin of social unrest" (Ralph 2008: 97). It is easy to imagine how genres like hip hop would take root amongst young people, especially with the implication that this music can be an agent of political change. Part of these changes, thus, is a redefining and a yearning for an idealized masculinity, against forces that seek to deny young men this ideal.

One of the ultimate goals of most men in Tanzania who seek to embody a version of ideal masculinity is to be financially independent. Across the border in Mozambique, a similar gestation of youth, caused by economic disparity and political disconnects from the state, force men to reckon with an "inability to live up to the ideals of masculinity" (Archambault 2012: 396). Notably, this ideal has historical been "the autonomous man who provides for his

dependent women and children"; both social change in the form of increased women's independence in East Africa, as well as the economic limitations on young men's financial abilities have kept this ideal as a distant horizon for many (Archaumbault: 397). Tanzanian men face similar pressures; in part, this is what drives many men into the bongo hustle culture. Almost every young man I interviewed in 2022 indicated that hip hop was not their full-time job; most worked in a variety of jobs such as a bodaboda[20] driver, barber, shopkeeper, teacher, or were in school training for a pre-professional degree, which more often than not was a lucrative industry such as tourism. In Sanaa Kwa Manufaa seminars, similar echoes of hustling and entrepreneurship came up as effective tools to market oneself as an MC. For example, Nash, who led the seminars, stresses the importance of knowing one's fans directly and having their phone numbers in your contacts; this way, marketing and selling music through Whatsapp is easier facilitated, and your fans get a more personalized experience buying music directly from the artist. The work involved in creating a lasting fanbase that you have personally met, however, is considered a regular part of being a rapper. It is both an occupational hazard and a necessity for men to be constantly busy as an aspiring MC.

The primary goal of this hustling is success as an MC; however, this success would come with the secondary benefit of being actualized as a man in Tanzanian society. Many rappers were and currently still are de-legitimized as "hooligans," with the general public associating hip hop culture with crime, truancy, and drug use.[21] There is almost definitely a connection between

[20] Bodabodas are motorcycle cabs that are often the fastest and cheapest ways to get around. An apocryphal story suggests the name comes from their ability to take passengers across borders without needing paperwork, due to their nimble nature.

[21] One of the major goals of Sanaa Kwa Manufaa is a legitimization of hip hop culture and a re-framing of it being associated with hooliganism. The songs made by each group of artists in the program were celebratory of their city and were exclusively positive. Even the name itself, translated to a "Cypher For the Future," implies a culture of building community and moving forward together.

sensationalized depictions of American rappers and this sentiment of hooliganism in Tanzanian rap music, although most rappers make serious efforts to differentiate themselves from their American counterparts in terms of respectability. However, this sentiment of hooliganism remains in the popular Tanzanian imagination, and in this popular depiction, there is almost always an association with rappers being young people. In the early years of rap music, it was "perceived as a music corrupting the minds of the country's young" (Perullo 2005: 76). Outside of Tanzania, a decision by young people to participate in rap music (and discuss issues rap music often articulate to its audience) creates "an unfortunate caricature of youth as a 'lost generation,' unable to deal with complex situations and find diplomatic solutions to adverse circumstances" (Perullo 2005). Ultimately, rap music in Tanzania, especially as a music that positions itself in opposition to the ruling party, will take a while to be considered legitimate in the eyes of the public. This legitimacy requires rap music to integrate with already existing forms in the music business. Tayzo, a rapper from Stone Town in Zanzibar, argues that "hip hop changed [his] life because it gives [him] respect" (Tayzo, interview by author, Stone Town, March 30, 2022). He elaborates that many of his peers did not understand his decision to start rapping initially; however, he cites an instance where a few of his peers heard his song on the radio and began to regard Tayzo more seriously in regard to his music. Institutionalization of rap music, while historically a complex issue for the culture of hip hop more generally, also helps in a mission of legitimacy in the Tanzanian public's view. Rapper 12code from Mtwara cited the Sanaa Kwa Manufaa as being helpful in steering rappers on a professional path: to be serious musicians. Many rappers, to him, are not as committed to being music professionals as they should; as a result, "watu wengi wanakuwa hana imani na muziki wa rap" [*Many people do not have faith in rap music*] (12code, interview with author, Mtwara, April 04, 2022). However, more organized

events such as this one legitimizes the practice of rap music as either a viable art form or potentially a lucrative career.

**Masculinity in Current Politics**

Financial or political success has often been the ultimate market of legitimacy for musicians in Tanzania. In the culture of Tanzanian hip hop, many of the founding members have made music or been in the public eye long enough to be considered established and respected in their fields. However, hip hop it is a difficult genre to grow old in without some sort of rebrand or significant financial success. Some of the country's most respected rappers, like Professor Jay[22] or Mr. II, were able to leverage their successful rap careers into cabinet positions. They have garnered the respect of the generalized population, however, from an eventual "growing up"; it is difficult to say if they would be just as lauded by Tanzanian society if they never shifted to politics. As previously stated, political power in Tanzania is articulated through elder masculinity and musicians who seek to attain said power have to adapt their own versions of masculinity to fit the model of politics. Tracking the history of Diamond Platnumz and CCM, as a notable example of this, can further elucidate how various masculine performances are recognized to be politically potent.

Diamond's relationship with CCM started in 2010 with his support of then candidate Jakaya Kikwete. In spite of the significant likelihood that his politicking helped him secure favor with the government and radio play, Diamond often positions himself as the people's champion. While not necessarily relatable, the story of his brand is one of a hardworking artist who has reached the top, and represents the apex of Tanzanian popular culture. His 2018 album, *A Boy*

[22] As of 2020, Professor Jay is no longer a member of the opposition party in Tanzania's Parliament, and is currently suffering from health problems.

*From Tandale*, references a rags to riches narrative; Tandale is not one of the nicer areas of Dar es Salaam, where Diamond is from, and the cover depicts a stylish portrait of the artist, now famous from his efforts. In many respects, the success of Diamond is an aspirational ideal that many Tanzanians are more than willing to buy into, even if it is under questionable circumstances. A pertinent example of this was a concert in 2019, called *Diamond Platnumz 10*, during which Diamond was to hold a concert celebrating the success of his music career. Conspicuously, this concert was held on New Years Eve, on the eve of the election year where John Magufuli would be voted back in to be president. Diamond's concert would be preceded by a train ride from Dar es Salaam to Kigoma, a city on the banks of Lake Tanganyika. Symbolically this crossing would connect one of the most western cities in the country with the nation's cultural hub in the furthest east of the mainland. However, some wondered whether or not there was an additional motive to the concert's location, given the propensity of Magufuli to use Diamond for political stunts. Muhidin Shangwe, a professor at the University of Dar es Salaam, notes in a 2020 blog post that the Kigoma reigon has historically been "a hotbed of opposition politics," and that the city is home to "Zitto Kabwe, a firebrand opposition figure, leader of the ACT – an opposition party on the rise" (Shangwe 2020). Given the events of the concert, it is hard to imagine Magufuli and Diamond being unaware of the political significance of the concert's location.

The concert was a resounding success for Diamond and Magufuli. Admission was free, and Diamond played a lengthy set that covered a significant amount of his catalog. Perhaps the most charged moment of the night was when Diamond, in between playing the hits, started to sing the praises of CCM, often shouting "CCM Oyee" to a crowd of thousands. Additionally, he "went on to squash the notion that life has gotten harder under President Magufuli's tenure,

flaunting his success as proof of that": any doubters of this fact were labeled as "haters" (Shangwe 2020). However, the most important part of the night was when Magufuli himself called Diamond on his personal cellphone, where the pair publicly exchanged compliments, with Diamond holding the phone to the microphone for the audience to hear. Diamond went on to tell Magufuli and the crowd "tunapiga kushinda kwa mia! mia!": this can be translated to mean "we will win by 100%." Regardless of the political leanings of the crowd, Diamond explicitly removes the boundaries from CCM supporters and Diamond Platnumz fans with these remarks. Magufuli's public praise of Diamond additionally furthers notions of masculinity, as he referred to his success and work ethic as being a "real man," for everything he has done. As Shangwe argues, Tanzanian society "equates masculinity with bravery and success," so Diamond, at this concert, in this state, has epitomized these ideals to the fullest (Shangwe 2020). It is especially telling that Magufuli is praising Diamond in this way, as Magufuli was known as a male chauvinist who was socially discriminatory towards anyone unlike his own traditional worldview. In a 2017 quote, he claimed, "God created only heterosexual creatures," and that is why "there is no homosexuality in animals" (Nyamsenda 2018: 8). Historically, Magufuli's socially conservative views have put him at odds with bongo flava culture, specifically with bongo flava's version of masculinity that is lascivious and youthful. However, in publicly demonstrating that this masculinity can also articulate more traditional values of hard work and success, Diamond is able to access political power and praise from the state, since the state also functions through these traditional masculine characteristics. In this instance, Diamond demonstrates a model that can be followed by other artists on how to not only garner praise from the government, but also become publicly actualized as a "real man" in Tanzanian society.

**Masculinity Performances as a Woman**

Even if you do not publicly or privately identify as a man, there is a societal expectation to perform versions of masculinity in Tanzanian popular music spaces. Alex Perullo notes that in the Tanzanian music economy, "with the exception of singers and live muisc dancers, men dominate the music scene" (Perullo 2011: 129). More generally, his ethnography on the live music scene in Dar es Salaam makes the salient point that if one were to study the music businesses of Tanzania, men would provide a supermajority of the data for such a project, as "men occupy most forms of employment in Tanzania's music economy" (Perullo 2011). The world of Tanzanian hip hop and bongo flava operates in this way – both genres get their cues from the patriarchal society within which they operate. However, in both genres, women continue to find work and make significant inroads into mostly male dominated spaces. As this chapter has argued, power operates in these spaces on certain performances of masculinity. Thus, women who seek to engage and thrive in these spaces must additionally find ways to mirror or replicate said masculine performances.

Negotiating how one can perform as a feminine rapper, and how feminine one can be as a rapper, is not a practice exclusive to hip hop in Tanzania. In the world of American hip hop, women have had to navigate the assumption that "rap music has been often presented in the media as an urban male phenomenon" (Keyes 2004: 186). Even before the self-expressive culture of hip hop, numerous black American women navigated and staked out various spaces in blues music in the early twentieth century, where they could discuss the feminine counterpart to the aforementioned "urban male" lifestyle. In order to make their performances more palatable to a patriarchal society, American women rappers have adopted certain personas, which, while diverse in their representation of individuals' experience, are all still created under the

overarching umbrella of a patriarchal society. Thus, it is impossible to create a persona that ignore masculinity as a woman rapper, both in Tanzania and in the US: it must be negotiated. For example, we have the archetype of the "Queen Mother," which Cheryl Keyes identifies as "female rappers who view themselves as African-centered icons, which is often evoked by their dress" (Keyes: 189). This archetype incorporates black American understandings of African royalty to demand respect, not only "for their people but for black women by men" (Keyes: 190). Thus, even if one is positioning oneself as a woman as being non-erotic and motherly, a woman cannot inhabit a persona that ignores men completely. However, as limiting as these personas sometimes may be to individuals, they nevertheless provide a crucial way for women to represent themselves in rap music, instead of being background dancers in music videos, or objects of lust or ire in lyrics. The following section provides three insights into how three Tanzanian women rappers represent themselves, and how these representations negotiate the patriarchal society in which they reside.

My intention in interviewing the women I came across with my work with *Sanaa Kwa Manufaa* was never to encapsulate the experience of being a woman in the Tanzanian hip hop world. My comments on this experience are woefully under researched, and doing a deeper dive into how a woman navigates the music business in Tanzania is a project for future ethnography. However, my interviews with a selection of women rappers demonstrated what felt like an already understood fact – being a woman is just one identity that converges with several others in one's professional persona. For example, Jadah Makanta, a rapper based out of Mbeya, doesn't see herself as being unfairly treated because of her gender, if only because she is part of a prolific hip hop family in Tanzania that is known and respected. Issues like being coerced into sexual favors for studio time, a not uncommon situation in Tanzanian hip hop, do not exist for

her, as she notes "Kicho kwanza ambacho kwanza tulianza kufanya tengeneza studio yetu…tuko producers na nne…" [*The first thing we started to do was create our studio…we are four producers…*] (Jadah Makanta, interview by author, Mbeya, March 25, 2022). Her access to studio time and producers, a limited commodity in the hip hop world, is quite extensive. Jadah is an experienced and skillful rapper, and this kind of expertise is part of her performance as a rapper. In an impromptu cypher that arose after the Mbeya iteration of Sanaa Kwa Manufaa, she distinguished herself as one of the better, if not the best, rapper in the group. Jadah, thus, utilizes her unique positioning in the music business to not necessarily eliminate the issue of her gender, but rather not present it as a key aspect of her persona. Not every woman within the world of Tanzanian hip hop has the opportunities and relative stability career wise as she does, and Jadah capitalizes significantly on these opportunities to continue to make excellent music.

Akenna, a rapper and singer from Bagamoyo, is not as lucky as Jadah. Akenna is a bit less experienced as a rapper, but only because she has positioned herself as a bit of a polyglot entertainer. Generally speaking, she can sing, rap, she sells homemade bags and, as a side hustle, organizes safari trips that incorporate yoga in national parks. The issues she struggles with range from being generally about her identity as someone who raps to more specifically about being a woman in the hip hop world. Notably, like many men who rap, she says that she is often told "…wasilimia kadhaa ya watu wa Tanzania wakionia mkwanamke afanya muziki wa hip hop wanamuona kama muhuni" [*A large percent of Tanzanians see a woman doing hip hop muisc and see her as a thug*] (Akenna, interview by author, Bagamoyo, April 10, 2022). She is not safe from assumption that many rappers do not contribute significantly to society, and instead are just hooligans. However, there is the added implication that hip hop in general is a man's genre, and that any feminized version of it seems to be less than the masculine equivalent. There is notably

less space for women to sing in the hip hop world than there is in bongo flava. Akenna notes that people often ask her why she performs hip hop as a woman, as it is not perceived as easy for her to succeed in this space. She tells me that people ask her "kwa nini unaimba hip hop? Utakosa fursa nyingi kwa sababu hip hop ni muziki ngumu sana" [*Why are you singing hip hop? You will miss many opportunities because hip hop is a very difficult music*] (Akenna, 2022). A generous reading of these interactions is to argue that these people are simply reminding Akenna of the difficulty of making it as a woman in the Tanzanian music business, and often success is found through channeling one's talents through pre-existing channels of music that is appropriate for women to perform. However, a more accurate understanding of these comments reflects the sexism inherent in discussions and understandings about Tanzanian hip hop as well as music in general throughout the country. Hip hop, borrowing ideas of masculinity from Tanzanian society, is embedded with ideology that it is a music that requires hard work to succeed in, and, by extension, actualization of manhood through hard work is actualization of becoming a successful MC. To this person talking to Akenna, to achieve such success as an MC is incongruent with understandings of the capabilities of a woman in Tanzanian society; namely, the work is too hard for a woman to bear.

The third woman I was able to interview goes by Gynah. She is an RnB singer from Dar es Salaam, whose work in hip hop spaces has been critiqued and commented on as being out of character for an artist like her. She told me when she identifies herself as an artist in the hip hop space, "people look at me different…they think that I'm going crazy, because why do hip hop it's not a genre for women, they say. And, they say that blankly" (Gynah, interview with author, Dar es Salaam, May 5, 2022). Comments like these are hardly out of the ordinary for a woman in hip hop. However, Gynah notes that her own inspiration for how she expresses herself as an

artist comes from previous women rappers who have not tried to explicitly imitate masculine performances in rap music. Lauryn Hill, specifically is a heavy influence because of her ability to be expressive and emotive in her rap performance while also being an MC that is taken seriously. To Gynah, one of the reasons as to why hip hop in Tanzania is considered a masculine genre is the ways emotion is considered and performed. Gynah argues that "to be female – it doesn't mean I can't do hip hop. Especially, it means you should kwa sababu if it's something that mtu anapenda, anaweza kuexpress vizuri zaidi in a different way" [*Especially, it means you should because if it's something that somebody likes, you can express something much better in a different way*] (Gynah, 2022). Her point here is that by mainly utilizing masculine forms of emotional expression, there are gaps in the spectrum of expression that Gynah believes can be filled utilizing more feminine performances. It is a thoughtful response to the paradigm of having to constantly try and appeal to masculine performance, and with enough artists being empowered to express themselves, could actually change the landscape of hip hop in Tanzania.

**Conclusion**

Political power in Tanzania cannot be divorced from individual expressions of masculinity. Just as Ocobock noted that the concept of the "elder state" was a way to understand colonial and post-colonial constructions of Kenyan political power, in Tanzania there are countless examples of how expectations of masculinity, performed in the proper manner, both enforces publicly facing gender roles for regular citizens and determines how politicians should act. On a cultural level, musicians also understand that if one is wishing to be financially successful, there is a narrow space for how one can perform versions of masculinity, whether that be a bongo flava archetype, a hardworking rapper, or a woman performing a version of femininity that is still governed by aforementioned masculine archetypes. Posts on social media,

music videos, and even live performances all provide young people with examples of what it means to be an ideal man in Tanzania. Additionally, these templates can easily be connected to pre-existing understandings of masculine ideals in Tanzanian society, as is the case with Weiss's work on barbershops in Arusha. Ultimately, however, true success comes from being able to translate one's persona into different generational ideals of being a man, as is the case with Diamond Platnumz. Specifically, he is able to create and uphold the young, attractive bongo flava ideal, while simultaneously promoting a more traditional sense of a self-made ethos and hard work. Unfortunately, in a patriarchal society and music business, even women are not exempt from these expectations, and must additionally perform publicly in accordance to masculine ideals.

## Chapter VI:

## Conclusion

In the early 2000s, as more and more bongo flava artists began to earn money and become successful, there was an understanding that the music could ultimately be utilized to lift oneself and others out of poverty. This desire, a central facet of early Tanzanian hip hop, was one of the major reasons that bigger media houses in Tanzania sought to reward artists that shifted their sound from a more critical, hip hop sounding music to something more palatable, more popular music sounding, and less politically threatening. We can be sure of the political efficacy of bongo flava because of the Tanzanian state's (arguably successful) attempt to co-opt it. Remembering that Geertz insisted that culture was a social act, one can see bongo flava culture to be a re-shaping of how the youth interacted with each other, other groups in society, and ultimately the state. The ways in which performative social actions shape the way a society organizes itself can be considered the definition of cultural politics. It is necessary to analyze, then, *how* bongo flava engages politics at the personal and state level.

Personal politics can almost be synonymous with our previous definition of culture, where social acts between community members help create the "rules" of the community. As the interactions between community members change, so do said "rules." State politics, on the other hand, is often what is thought of when describing "politics," especially to those who are most disillusioned by the actions of the state. This version of politics can mean anything in which the state creates a reality in an official capacity. This can mean how the state sets up elections, how it states its goals as a nation, and how it punishes deviants from its rule. A shortening gap between this kind of local politics and state politics was one of the stated goals of bongo flava music. This is not only because of hip hop's predisposition to be critical of systems of power, but also from a

longstanding cultural idea that musicians in Tanzania have an educational role in society. This belief was a holdover from the socialist period, when the state was the main patron of the arts. Thus, music was hardly seen as threatening to state power until it did not rely on the state for patronage and could effectively be critical of it. Thus, by articulating a model of society that deviated from the model described by the state, bongo flava music could be seen as a threat to the status quo.

Today, however, bongo flava's shortening of the gap between the personal and political still exists, but the genesis of this practice comes from the state, not from the people. At a personal level, bongo flava describes life and celebrity in Tanzania. It is popular music made by likeable and attractive celebrities, who make catchy music designed to get stuck in your head and make you dance. Outside of election years, there are rarely any mentions of the government, or presidential candidates in this music. Historically, and today, it is a music that is wildly popular with the youth of Tanzania, and many young people create serious, emotionally charged connections to the music. The state knows and expertly utilizes this connection between bongo flava and young people. Thus, its utilizing of bongo stars in electioneering, down to having bongo flava exclusively be played at CCM rallies, is an offering of the state to young people: a literal vote of confidence from the youth in exchange for a championing of beloved celebrities from the state. The paradigm of how bongo flava removes the distance between the individual and the state in Tanzania has been completely flipped from its historical origins. Attitudes towards politics within the hip hop community represent a continuation of said historical origins, and for many rappers, the stakes of representing life authentically in Tanzania is just as dire as they are for the Tanzanian government. While some rappers may deride the commercialized music as being too focused on superficial beliefs and values, the major axis on which bongo

flava can be opposed to hip hop in Tanzania is their incompatible versions of Tanzanian life. As previously stated, authenticity is a prized value in this specific genre of hip hop, which connects to many other versions of hip hop culture globally. Strict stylistic adherences to certain flows, aesthetics, topics, and representations of self are various ways rappers can perform this authenticity. However, one must remember that these representations and performances are just that: performances, which may feel or seem more real to some, but are perhaps also not truly painting a realistic picture of quotidian life.

Bongo flava music and its culture on social media are not solely responsible for articulating a political reality in Tanzania that is out of step with the lived experience of many. In fact, some Tanzanians probably are just as, if not more critical of official government communications and claims as they are of the bongo flava pop stars that corroborate these claims. This is why underground hip hop in Tanzania, even if it is couched in metaphor and double meaning, feels so legitimate and real to many listeners: there aren't many other public cultural products that do this. Bongo flava, on the other hand, for the most part doesn't constantly put out songs praising the government; however, each bit of bongo flava propaganda, when its released, further cements this idea that the two parties are in collaboration with one another. For a music that at one point was synonymous with some sort of politically critical voice in Tanzania, it is disconcerting and intriguing to see its function in the political machine today.

Understanding the function of bongo flava in CCM's politicking can also help us limit our assumptions and beliefs about the emancipatory nature of social media. Specific situations, like the increased ability for independent artists to market their music on social media and political struggles documented on Twitter like the Arab Spring, feed into an ideology that social

media is a populist platform that should be utilized to pronounce and demonstrate the voice of the people. However, the ease with which whole populations are encouraged and influenced to follow and like authoritarian organizations, like CCM, feels much more the rule than the exception. In the architecture of most social media platforms, the loudest voices are the ones who already have a significant following, and so it is easy to monopolize conversations about a certain topic as an already powerful force. Musicians who praise the government may be considered "sellouts" or "sycophants" by independent artists who wish to make more critical music, but it is difficult to see how these artists, in the interest of their own success, have much of a choice in the matter. CCM has already indicated what happens if too big a musician steps out of line with Roma Mkatoliki, and most of these other musicians would rather keep their critical opinions to themselves in the interest of their careers. Thus, the part of bongo flava on social media that effectively functions as a propaganda wing for CCM only exists because there is no other alternative. The ethos of bongo flava in its origins was to do whatever it took to survive, and in a strange coincidence, artists who make the non-critical pop called bongo flava today are honoring that legacy. Historically, the state in Tanzania has been deliberate in describing the reality of life in Tanzania, and has used that description to determine policy. Alongside being a symbol of youth culture, and an integral part of what it's like to be online as a Tanzanian, bongo flava now is part of the government's articulation of reality, regardless of how true this articulation is.

Finally, as attitudes surrounding how a man should act in Tanzania change, so will the ability to capture political power through performances of masculinity. The current president's time in office has already changed the ways bongo flava musicians have acted towards the government. Additionally, even though President Hassan is hardly a departure from mainstream

CCM policies, she demonstrates to the public that effective stewardship of the nation can be achieved from a woman in the highest government office. In the world of Tanzanian hip hop, however, there is much work to be done to change the culture from the inside. With the success of every new female rapper, more and more women are empowered to shrug off societal expectations about the genre and create music that is authentic to them. Additionally, it is to be expected that newer generations of male rappers are slowly changing the archetype of how one is actualized as a man, both in the world of hip hop and society at large. Future research on this topic could entail a more comprehensive and nuanced view of what it means to be a woman in the world of Tanzanian hip hop. Additionally, to better understand how masculinity functions as a vehicle of political power, government representatives that have worked with musicians are another research population worth looking into. It remains to be seen how much ideal masculinity will change in the coming years in Tanzania, and how these performances are encoded with political efficacy.

This dissertation ultimately interrogates the abilities and limits of music to make change in a community and a nation. Bongo flava and Tanzanian hip hop cannot enact political change in a vacuum, but there are multitudes of avenues in which the cultural actors who listen to and create this music can change their society. Sometimes, as in the cases of performances of masculinity or deeply held beliefs surrounding the role of musicians in society, these musics are reflections of inter-personal politics in Tanzania. In other cases, such as the ways bongo flava culture manifests online, or the Whatsapp networking done by many Tanzanian rappers, these musics transform inter-personal politics. Both genres of music are constantly adapting to new developments in the Tanzanian government, whether that be changing minsters of the arts, or a new president who may feel differently about governmental critique from music. Tanzanian

rapper understand themselves to represent life authentically, in a way that is for the people. Bongo flava remains the aspirational music of the youth, but also for the government, controlled by CCM, to dictate what the young people's hope for their nation should be. Both genres seek to flatten the space between the people and the state, and articulate life in Tanzania.

## Appendix A: Links to Songs Referenced in the Document

*Mitihani (2012) – Nash MC*

Nash Mc - Mitihani.mp3

*Mchochezi (2015) – Nash MC*

Nash Mc - Mchochezi.mp3

*Magufuli (2019) – Harmonize*

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FrAZ5Lzf5AU

*Mtwara Cypher (2022) – Sanaa Kwa Manufaa feat. Various Artists*

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OekL4oVsa5k

*Naogopa (2022) – Harmonize and Marioo*

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJONP5YAokU

*Fire (2022) – Zuchu*

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78Zf-2wUh6c

## Appendix B: Musical Comparison Between Bongo Flava and Tanzanian Hip Hop

| | Bongo Flava | Tanzanian Hip Hop |
|---|---|---|
| **Overview** | Umbrella term for popular media culture in Tanzania, whose aesthetics change with current popular music and cultural trends. | Hip hop culture which includes rap music, graffiti, breakdancing and DJing in Tanzania. At one point was synonymous with bongo flava when hip hop was the popular music in Tanzania, since then has remained aesthetically and politically stable while bongo flava has changed. |
| **Origins** | The term could be traced to a Tanzanian radio DJ's definition of popular music, depicted as the "flavor of the week," in the late 1990s. | Established in 1980s in urban centers in Tanzania; borrowed significant aesthetics from American hip hop culture, then slowly became relevant to local musicians and audiences. |
| **Sonic Aesthetics** | Sonic aesthetics vary significantly based on trends and individuals; key cohesive features include more melodic instrumentation, singing in Swahili, and danceable rhythms. | Traditional in terms of its understanding of hip hop; often emphasizes rapping and lyrics over melodic content, rhythm that is harder to dance to and easier to rap over, vocals are high in the mix to emphasize lyrics, production is sparser than bongo flava. |
| **Visual Aesthetics** | Today, mostly depictions of flashy life of celebrity, often focused on content like love, money, and partying. Borrows heavily from 2000s southern hip hop "bling bling" aesthetics. | Hip hop music videos center on heightening the experience of listening to the lyrics, or often are visual additions to lyrical storytelling. |
| **Political Leanings** | Usually apolitical, but every so often, and during election years, bongo flava artists are outwardly supportive of Chama Cha Mapinduzi, the ruling political party in Tanzania. | Discussions of issues of daily life are common in songs, although not necessary for inclusion into the genre. Critique of the government can be done, but carefully, and is rarely performed in a direct manner. |

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