

Popular Art and the Reconfiguration of Political Intolerance in Kenya

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Abstract

Political intolerance is a recurrent feature in any general election in Kenya. The charged political atmosphere during elections has often seen heated verbal tiffs among politicians and supporters of opposing political leanings degenerate into intimidation, violence, eviction of tenants from their houses, discrimination at the workplace, denial of job opportunities, and even murder of political opponents, among many other atrocious acts. This article explores how popular artistic productions deployed by the National Super Alliance (NASA) coalition in the run-up to the 8 August 2017 general elections to galvanise the electorate in its nationwide campaigns implicitly sparked intolerance among their political opponents. The article examines popular art forms such as popular songs, cartoons, memes and popular religious songs that centre on this historical period in the country and are directly associated with the NASA coalition. The article shows how these creative art forms morph into vehicles of political aspirations, codifying political visions and manifestos. They become central to political struggle and contestations over power, and when reconfigured, potentially anchor political intolerance.

Keywords: reconfiguration; popular art; tolerance, political intolerance; Kenya

Introduction

Representations of politics in art constitute a central part of not only the contemporary creative production processes but also the representation, reconfiguration, reactivation, circulation and exhibition of various political imaginaries in Kenyan society today. The art forms have a close-knit relationship to politics but do not expressly have political aims in their representations. The creative artists use popular spaces such as the street, walls of buildings and popular music as a canvas upon which to etch out political issues afflicting society at any given time. These arenas, therefore, serve as popular spaces for artistic expression and institutional critique of various issues such as poor governance, unemployment, corruption and unjust political systems, among others. This article

underscores the fact that the diverse ways in which popular art represents political events relating to Kenya's 2017 general elections provide insightful and multiple ways of reading the political intolerance witnessed in the country in the run-up to and after the 2017 general elections.

Political tolerance is one of the central values underpinning any democracy, and Kenya is no exception. Articles 33 and 35 of the Kenyan Constitution outline that every person has a right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press, including the right to receive and impart information. It is worth noting that freedom of expression forms part of the critical foundations of any democracy and is intertwined with the fact that citizens, and various actors in society, should tolerate differences of opinion from others as long as such opinions do not infringe on others' rights or cause harm to them. That is to say, in a democratic state, various actors and the citizens do not have to agree on expressed ideas, but they need to agree on the right to express them. Though a daunting task, it is imperative for countries such as Kenya to nurture the culture of tolerance among its citizens in order to foster its democratic gains.

John Booth and Mitchell Seligson (2009, 145) broadly define political tolerance as "a person's willingness to support the civic and political rights of fellow citizens with whom she disagrees." Tolerance means putting up with that which one disagrees with and often requires citizens to exercise patience, open-mindedness and self-control. Tolerating differences of opinion among individuals can be a fundamental bulwark against atrocities, attacks and hate crimes (UNDP 2004). The primary quality that differentiates a civilised society from a radical society is tolerance towards opposing ideas of others. Failure to accommodate differences in opinions of others results in political intolerance. It should not be forgotten that a lack of political tolerance is why democratic transitions sometimes fail and why persecutions of groups take place. Many countries have burned due to political intolerance, and Kenya is no exception.

Political intolerance manifests itself in society in several ways. Acrimony resulting from political intolerance is a major threat to democracy as it leads to the destruction of property, discrimination at the workplace, eviction of tenants from their houses, denial of job opportunities, and even the murder of political opponents, among many other atrocious acts. At an emotional level, intolerance can be a source of immediate gratification, securing one's identity and providing certainty of one's enemy. There is nothing gratifying, however, in the social impact of intolerance. When intolerance reaches its social crescendo, it sparks fear, distrust, coercion, anger, violence, and a toxic brew of suffering that leaves nothing of the human spirit intact. Failure to tame political intolerance can have catastrophic ramifications for national integrity. Thus, this article analyses how the events of Kenya's 2017 general elections are not only etched into popular artistic productions in the country but how the political intolerance that characterised the country during this period is represented in popular art in particular.

Contextualising Political Intolerance in Kenya

Kenya has had a chequered history of political intolerance right from independence to date. Wanjala Nasong'o (2016, 165) observes that the fight for independence was "waged on many fronts—the cultural, the social, the political, the economic, and the military—and by multiple social force[s]—individual and the corporate, ethnic and religious as well as regional and transregional." Although the forces involved in the struggle for liberation were diverse, as Nasong'o rightly points out, all were united in anticolonial nationalism. It is worth noting that the sense of unity and collective purpose that characterised the struggle for independence was unparalleled. This was, however, short-lived because the common ground upon which the unity and collective purpose was predicated was irreparably damaged soon after Kenya attained self-rule as a result of political intolerance, among several other reasons.

Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya, engaged neo-patrimonialism in his leadership style, much to the chagrin of liberation heroes and heroines. Patrick Asingo (2003, 19–20) observes that neo-patrimonialism involves "incorporating into the political system and the bureaucratic institutions the patrimonial logic of ascribing the right to rule to a person rather than to an office." This situation saw appointments of state officers not necessarily based on merit but on their patriotism and loyalty to the president. Kenyatta's neo-patrimonialism, however, was characterised by what Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle (1997, 62) refer to as "systematic clientelism, where public sector jobs, material rewards and economic opportunities were offered as favours to clients who in turn mobilised political support and loyalty to the patron." The client-patron political ties transformed Kenyatta's regime into an authoritarian state, where the "relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade a formal political and administrative system" (Bratton and van de Walle 1997, 62). It was apparent that Kenyatta rewarded loyalties to those with close family ties and those from his ethnic community, especially his Kiambu turf. The ultimate effect of this was constant condemnation from the political elite of other ethnic communities who felt disenfranchised and shortchanged by President Kenyatta's style of leadership. Unable to tolerate their incessant criticism, Kenyatta could sack or use state agencies such as the police to quell and numb these dissenting voices.

The sudden death of President Kenyatta and the peaceful transfer of power to the then vice-president, Daniel Toroitich arap Moi, ensured stability and investor confidence in the country. President Moi promised to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor and ensured continuity of the principal ideals, policies and philosophies such as "African socialism" and "harambee," which had been a hallmark of the Kenyatta era. It is worth noting, however, that since Moi took over in 1978 to the advent of multiparty democracy in 1991, "the scope for criticism and free debate, already limited, was continually narrowed, civic society crippled and human rights infringed" (Kyle 1999, 203). Indeed, most of Moi's 24-year reign was characterised by political intolerance, with dissidents to Moi's rule arbitrarily arrested, summarily dismissed from government employment,

tortured, detained without trial, and having contrived charges raised against them, among other brutalities meted out to them by state agents such as the police.

Political intolerance has reared its ugly head in each election cycle since the introduction of multiparty democracy in Kenya. Politically instigated and state-sponsored killings dominated the 1992 and 1997 general elections. With the advent of multiparty democracy, as Joyce Nyairo observes, “the Moi state turned to ‘land clashes’ to control the vote in the populous Rift Valley” (Nyairo 2015, 45). Land clashes, also known as tribal clashes, were witnessed in various parts of the country such as Molo and Trans Mara in the Rift Valley region and parts of Mombasa. The spate of what seemed to be a well-choreographed and executed orgy of ethnic violence appears to have been designed not only “to discredit multi-partyism as a system that stirs ethnic animosity but also to displace from certain areas and thereby disenfranchise certain groups of voters unlikely to support the instigators of the violence” (Asingo 2003, 28). This is what Peter Mwangi Kagwanja (1998, 11) calls “killing the vote.” For instance, Richard A. Joseph (1999, 26) observes that the Rift Valley ethnic clashes alone “drove 350,000 people from their homes and killed 1,500.” It should be noted that ethnicity remains the primary means of political mobilisation and is an integral part of the political life in Kenya. Arguably, ethnic balkanisation is one of the most important variables that enabled President Moi to triumph in the multiparty general elections in 1992 and 1997, respectively.

Ethnic mobilisation, however, appears to shift with time and context in the political arena in Kenya. In the build-up to the 2002 elections, political intolerance reached a crescendo as the opposition united against the ruling party. The tides of political resentment turned to the ruling party as the public expressed dissatisfaction with its leadership and system of governance. A few examples will serve to illustrate the situation. On 15 November 2002, rioters pelted Vice-President Musalia Mudavadi’s motorcade, set up burning barricades and blocked all roads that he intended to use in his tour of western Kenya while marketing Uhuru Kenyatta, the ruling party’s presidential candidate. On 1 August 2002, President Moi was booed when he attempted to popularise the ruling party’s presidential candidate while officiating the opening of an agricultural show at Kisumu. Hostility and consistent booing from the crowds continued as President Moi toured various parts of the country to campaign for his candidate of choice. The peak of this political intolerance in the country was witnessed during the presidential handing over ceremony on 30 December 2002. During the swearing-in ceremony, the crowd humiliated the outgoing president by shouting him down and calling him all sorts of names. To the majority of Kenyans, the end of Moi’s reign signalled an end to political intolerance akin to his rule and heralded a new era of economic prosperity, political freedom, civil liberty and free debate.

President Mwai Kibaki took over power on 30 December 2002 in a wave of unprecedented popularity and goodwill. Kibaki’s reformist agenda sought to clean up government, fight corruption, poverty and correct past injustices. However, this quickly

faded as accusations and counter accusations of political betrayal, acrimony, bitterness and corruption took centre stage. The hope and optimism that greeted the nation as Kibaki rode to power was quickly replaced with intolerance to the extent that the general public subverted his government's call to patriotism *Najivunia kuwa Mkenya* (I'm proud to be a Kenyan) to *Navumilia kuwa Mkenya* (I'm persevering as a Kenyan). The bitterness and despondence among the masses was manifested in the 2005 referendum and the 2007/2008 post-election violence that engulfed the nation.

This article interrogates how creative artistic productions predicated on Kenya's 2017 general elections represent the political intolerance that characterised the country during this period. It enriches current scholarship on political intolerance in Kenya on two fronts. First, this article probes political intolerance in Kenya through the prism of popular art, thereby depicting how Kenyan artists reconfigure intolerance in their creative works. And second, this article provides a reading of a variety of popular arts in order to better understand political intolerance within the Kenyan context through art. Thus, popular art forms such as popular songs, memes, cartoons, and religious songs are analysed to show how the popular arts space not only forms the canvas upon which to represent but also to reconfigure incidences of political intolerance in the run-up to and after the 2017 general elections in Kenya and in the process collectively articulates steps towards building a greater understanding and bridges towards peaceful co-existence.

Reading the "Popular" in Popular Culture

As an area of academic inquiry, the study of popular culture has largely been influenced by Africa's diverse cultures. The uniqueness of cultural experiences in Africa poses equally interesting challenges to the study of popular culture. This article finds particularly useful the criteria popularised by scholars such as Karin Barber (1997), Stephanie Newell (2002) and Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome (2013) regarding the production, distribution and consumption of popular culture. These scholars argue that the fluidity in cultural production and consumption in Africa defies the hierarchical classification in society. Karin Barber, for example, notes that there is a "vast domain of cultural production that straddle[s] and dissolve[s] various distinctions" (Barber 1997, 2). Joyce Nyairo and James Ogude (2005) similarly argue that with the proliferation of new media technologies such as the internet, lower echelons of society and the elite now share social spaces and make use of motifs and genres that may not be considered specific to them. As Nyairo and Ogude (2005) note, social mobility of cultural artefacts or even their appropriation across social boundaries is not something that is specifically confined to one group. I therefore approach the "popular" in this article as a blend of voices and interests not confined to a particular section of the society. Indeed, in the situation of a country such as Kenya, both the masses and the political elite consume certain popular cultural productions, showing the fluidity and intermediary position of such popular productions.

This article finds Stuart Hall's observation on "the people versus the power bloc" informative in reading the "popular" (Hall 1992). Hall (1992, 238) argues that popular culture is "organised around the contradiction between the popular forces versus the power bloc." This argument introduces us to another strand of the "popular" that has influenced the study of popular culture: the idea of the people. Barber (1997, 4) talks about the "popular" having "a powerful sense of the people" engaging in its production, circulation and consumption. The people recognise and name their everyday practices in society in their popular artefacts as a way of remembering them. The idea of "the people," however, remains a highly fluid and contested social category. Sparks (1992) observes that the term "the people" has also been invariably used as a tool for political mobilisation. But Sparks also notes the "shifting" uses of the term by both the political Left and the political Right who at their convenience imbue the concept with new meanings that merely justify their ideological aims. Indeed, this is the case in Kenya, as this article shows.

We also read the "popular" as defined by its "didactic" characteristics. Michael Etherton (1982, 361) avers that African popular arts attempt to "open the eyes of the masses to their own objective historical situation, the actual conditions of their existence and thus enabling them to empower themselves." Barber (1997, 2) offers a similar argument when she argues that the long-held assumption of the "popular" as carefree has now been replaced by "the recognition that genres billed as entertainment usually talk of matters of deep interest and concern to the people who produce and consume them." For example, Jane Bryce (cited in Barber 1997, 6) finds the African pacesetters series dealing with serious issues that affect African societies such as trying to grapple with the challenges of urbanisation. Fabian equally recognises African popular arts as a site where "perceptions, experiences and problems are worked out in an open never-ending process" (cited in Barber 1997, 6).

We also read the "popular" from an aesthetic perspective, with emphasis placed on its openness to experimentation. African popular texts are especially "parasitic," allowing a great deal of borrowing and experimentation. Dodson (2002, 45) argues that to define popular fiction in Africa, we must note that local practitioners constantly absorb "new cultural currents, poach upon so-called 'traditional' and 'elite' cultural discourses, adapt and innovate and operate outside of 'official' art forms." Similarly, Barber (1997, 6) underscores African popular arts' "ability to draw in and creatively absorb materials from the outside in order to fuel local contests and projects" without being pulled into the West's magnetic field. This article also examines popular artefacts within the context of how the popular represents and mediates politics and power. Jean-Francois Bayart (1993, 20) suggests that a discussion of power in Africa must include "the people involved, the social strategies as the material basis of this governmentality." Our discussion also involves a discussion of the techniques that Bayart (1993, 254) has described as the "techniques of evasion and pretence." These techniques characterise daily life in Kenya as points of entry to understanding the modalities of politics and power in Kenya through a reading of the popular arts.

“Tibim” and Alternate Political Conscientisation in the 2017 General Election Campaigns

Elections in Kenya have a predilection for triggering a surge in cultural productions, most notably, popular music. Popular music enjoys high-profile political visibility during elections as the political class engages popular artists to communicate certain political messages during their campaigns. Kimani Njogu and Harvey Maupeu (2007, xiii), for instance, observe that in the run-up to the 2002 general elections, “the national desire for change in Kenya was brought to the fore by artists.” Joseph Ogidi and Jahd Adonija under the name Gidi Gidi Maji Maji performed the song “Unbwogable” to the great delight of voters. “Unbwogable” became the song used to mobilise voters in support of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC). Along with other songs, “Unbwogable” propelled the NARC presidential candidate, Mwai Kibaki, to an eventual victory. The song transformed “the national imaginary” and provided a means to unify populations in a common cause of “resistance and victory” (Nyairo and Ogude 2005, 244). It galvanised Kenyans in such a way that ethnic proclivities and the many other competing identities just melted into a singular desire for change. Since then, members of the political class have consistently engaged artists in their political platforms. It was the case, for example, during the November 2005 National Referendum on the Draft Constitution of Kenya when the government and opposition deployed artists to disseminate their political agendas.

In the run-up to the 8 August 2017 general elections, the National Super Alliance (NASA) coalition adopted two popular songs for its nationwide campaigns. Campaigning on the theme of change, NASA adopted a Christian song, “Mambo ya Badilika” (Things are Changing—discussed in the next section) and a popular song called “Tibim.” Composed by Onyi Jalamo, “Tibim” was one of the popular songs that became NASA’s signature tune and official campaign song. It was such a powerful slogan that it would enthuse and charge crowds, even in the NASA opponents’ strongholds. Drawing from the rich Luo cultural repertoire of *Pakruok* (praise giving), Jalamo sings of a country solidly behind Raila Odinga’s bid to become president of Kenya by taking a roll call of notable NASA luminaries:

Raila igwe, Kenya tibim
Kalonzo igwe, Ukambani tibim
Wetangula igwe, Western tibim
Mudavadi igwe, Waluyia tibim
Kidero igwe, Nairobi tibim
Joho igwe, Mombasa tibim
Rasanga igwe, Siaya tibim
Ranguma igwe, Kisumu tibim
Obado igwe, Migori tibim
Awiti igwe, Homabay tibim

Raila King, Kenya tibim
Kalonzo King, Kamba land tibim
Wetangula King, Western tibim
Mudavadi King, Luyia nation tibim
Kidero King, Nairobi tibim
Joho Igwe, Mombasa tibim
Rasanga King, Siaya tibim
Ranguma King, Kisumu tibim
Obado King, Migori tibim
Awiti King, Homabay tibim

The song's political agency is evident in its ability to accentuate the fact that the composition of the NASA coalition is ethnically inclusive. To advance the inclusivity agenda, the song equally takes a roll call of women leaders in the NASA coalition:

Gladys Wanga Tibim!
Amilo Gesagesa Tibim!

The song thus celebrates this political unity and encourages the coalition leaders to soldier on since their victory is imminent, as is evident from various parts of the country:

<i>Kenya duto oramo Raila kawo telo</i>	Kenyans have vowed that
	Raila is bound to take power
<i>Nairobi oramo Raila kawo telo</i>	Nairobi has vowed that
	Raila is bound to take power
<i>Kisumu oramo Raila kawo telo</i>	Kisumu has vowed that
	Raila is bound to take power
<i>Pwani Mombasa oramo Raila Kawo telo</i>	Mombasa has vowed that
	Raila is bound to take power

The victory implied in the song is symbolised by the title of the song, "Tibim." *Tibim* is an onomatopoeic word which imitates the sound of something being struck hard, often as a final blow. It therefore evokes the emotion of triumph after struggle. In this regard, the song symbolised the hard blow that the NASA coalition was to hand the ruling Jubilee Party in the 8 August 2017 general elections.

Taking a cue from the practice of praise poetry, "Tibim" paints NASA's presidential candidate, Raila Odinga, as a national hero and recounts some of his "great" achievements nationally. In the song, Jalamo memorialises Odinga's struggle for democracy in Kenya and his role in the realisation of a devolved system of government by being at the forefront in the struggle for the review of the Independence Constitution which birthed the new Constitution of Kenya in 2010:

<i>Seche oromo we aywanie ngolo</i>	Time is up, let me sing for you
<i>Wuo nya Alego...NASA, NASA</i>	The son of a woman from Alego ... NASA
<i>Onyi jalamo an awacho kendo anwoyo</i>	Onyi Jalamo, I am saying and repeating this
<i>Wang'ni to wololo, wang'ni to wololo</i>	This time round it is no joke
<i>Amolo Odinga gik maitimo dongo</i>	Amolo Odinga, you have done great things
<i>ikelo democracy</i>	You have brought democracy
<i>Ichaki ikelo devolution</i>	You have brought devolution

Purposefully, Jalamo invokes memory in his song not only to remind the electorate of who Odinga is but to also add to the overall credibility of the song itself. It is this desire to stir the public memory that makes politicians rely on popular songs during their campaigns. Whereas Odinga's achievements in Kenya are in the public domain, Jalamo's enumeration of these well-known achievements in the song did not augur well with the Jubilee leaders and supporters who often resorted to using derogatory terms

such as “witchdoctor,” “sorcerer,” “lord of poverty” and *mundu muguruki* (mad man) in reference to Odinga. The deputy president is quoted in *The Daily Nation* as saying:

Wakati Uhuru Kenyatta anapanga tujenge daraja ya urafiki na undugu na umoja wa wakenya anasema tuko pamoja, ati yule mganga anasema Tialala ati sijui Tibim. Sasa mtu ya Uganga na uichawi atashindana na mtu ya Mungu namna gani? (Mwangi 2017)

(When Uhuru Kenyatta is planning how we are going to build friendships and brotherhood and unity among Kenyans, he says *tuko pamoja*, meanwhile that witch doctor is saying *Tialala* or *Tibim*. So how will a witchdoctor compete with a God-fearing person?)

The deputy president’s remarks show outright scorn and witty sarcasm towards the NASA presidential candidate. The deputy president further asserted that Odinga knows nothing about leadership other than “*Tibim*” and “*Tialala*.” Despite the fact that the song as a text by its nature is susceptible to varying interpretations and mixed reception, the act of interpretation should not degenerate into intolerance. While referring to multiple interpretations that a single text can generate, John Street (1997, 34) opines:

even where the artist is explicit about his or her purpose, and where everything seems to confirm a single reading, no text escapes counter or multiple other readings. ... [I]t is the struggle over rival interpretations that is most revealing of the politics of the text.

In looking at “*Tibim*” as text, Street’s observation explicitly applies, as the song attracts various interpretations, depending on the audience’ perceptions. In certain ways, however, the song provokes its imagined enemies into a kind of verbal combat. It is this provocation that the Jubilee Party leadership heavily relied on to accuse the NASA coalition of scheming to use underhand means to take power:

*Agwambo telo ikawo,
tinga ok mi ng'ato
Donge seche oromo chieng
rieny gokiny
Seche oromo kaw
odunga gi tong
Kalonzo oramo
ni telo ikawo
Wetangua donge oramo
ni telo ikawo
Mudavadi bende oramo
ni telo ikawo*

Agwambo leadership is taken
And not given
The time is now the early morning
When the sun is shining
The time is now to carry
Your shield and spear
Kalonzo has vowed
That leadership is taken
Wetangua has vowed
That leadership is taken
Mudavadi has also vowed
That leadership is taken

*Nairobi, wangni onge gima iweyo
Siaya wang'ni onge gima iweyo
makata kochuno to
wadonjo gi balangewa
Wuo nyalego,*

Nairobi is not leaving anything to chance
Siaya we are leaving anything to chance
If need be
We will climb in through the rafters
Son of the lady from Alego,

*Agwambo tinga,
Raila nyundo, in e ruathwa*

Agwambo tractor,
Raila hammer, you are our hero.

Whereas the NASA leadership laboured to explain that both the voter's card and identity card were the "shield and spear" referred to in the song and that the artist urges all the NASA supporters to rise up "early in the morning" and go to vote, the Jubilee leadership will have none of it. Instead, the Jubilee leadership pointed out that their opponents are planning to assume power undemocratically while citing the last stanza of this song. Taking a jibe at Odinga's role in the failed 1982 coup, the deputy president warned the NASA presidential candidate thus: "we know your history, we know what you're planning to do but beware that there will be dire consequences if you engage unscrupulous means to get to power" (Mwangi 2017). This implies that what simply began as an innocent popular song degenerated into political intolerance as the politicians engaged in unsavoury name-calling and slander throughout the campaign period. While this would be viewed as a weakness of the song, the stanza lends itself to the argument that meaning is not always inherent in a text, but is negotiated, created and recreated as the text moves through a set of overlapping "scapes" and "presences" (Appadurai 2002, 255). The capricious views of the political class during the campaigns provided the perfect "scapes" and "presences" for the varied interpretations of the song.

Religious Songs in the 2017 Presidential Campaigns

Ben Knighton (2009, 1) opines that religion and politics are "strange but inevitable bedfellows." By this, Knighton is referring to the ambiguous relationship between religion and politics in Africa and Kenya in particular. Often the church is viewed as "the healing balm for the hot anger of politics" (Knighton 2009, 7) and therefore should not be involved in politics because politics would make Christianity and the church unclean. It has been argued that Kenyans may not be proud at heart of their politics, but do find much satisfaction in being "notoriously religious" (Mbiti 1969, 1). Hence, because of decades of Christian missionary evangelisation and education, Christianity has become a part of Kenya's popular traditions.

The church has, however, found itself straddled in the country's politics since the struggle for multiparty democracy. In the 1990s, the church teamed up with the civil society and the opposition to demand for the repeal of section 2a of the Kenyan Constitution in order to pave the way for multiparty governance. The clergy provided a spiritual angle to the struggle as they referred to biblical verses such as Isaiah 1:18 to justify their actions, and gospel songs such as "Yote Yawezekana kwa Imani" (All is Possible by Faith) were popularised during the struggle. In 1997, the church again teamed up with opposition politicians in the clamour for constitutional reforms that would drastically reduce the powers of the executive, give more independence to Parliament, and decentralise much of the administrative power and financial responsibility. The church was also involved in voter education throughout the country before the 1997 general elections.

The deployment of popular gospel songs in political mobilisation became prominent as early as the 2002 general elections. The then opposition coalition, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), appropriated “Yote Yawezekana kwa Imani” (All is Possible by Faith) and subverted it as “Yote Yawezekana bila Moi” (All is Possible without Moi). The song became the party’s campaign anthem and was largely deployed in voter conscientisation and mobilisation against the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). The results were tremendous as the song transformed the fear that Kenyans had endured in Moi’s 24-year reign into acts of courage and gallantry. Even before the votes were cast, it was evident that the Moi regime had fallen to a resounding defeat by the opposition.

Nyairo (2015, 184) notes that “the diffusion of religious discourse into the political space found further traction in the 2013 general elections when gospel artists became a regular feature at Campaign rallies.” The main political formations, Jubilee and the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD), recruited a number of national and regional gospel artists to perform at campaign rallies throughout the country. During the swearing-in ceremony of Uhuru Kenyatta, on 9 April 2013, as the fourth President of the Republic of Kenya, Christian music dominated the event. Among the gospel artists that stood out during this function were Rufftone with his song “Mungu Baba” (God, Our Father), and Jemimah Thiong’o with her song “Mwenye Baraka” (The One with Blessings), which is widely known by the first line of its refrain, “*Akisema Atakubaliki hakuna atakaye zuia*” (If He declares that you be blessed there is none who will prevent that). Rufftone’s song, which many view as a peace anthem, features soldiers from the General Service Unit (GSU) and the National Youth Orchestra. Working together with the soldiers, Rufftone showed that the soldiers indeed can preach peace instead of being agents of brutality, as witnessed before. Though widely viewed as a deeply spiritual song, Jemimah Thiong’o took many by surprise during the ceremony when she quickly rephrased the refrain of her gospel song into the following political refrain:

<i>Akisema utakuwa Raisi,</i>	If He says you would be President
<i>hakuna atakaye zuia,</i>	No one will stand in the way
<i>Kwani yeye ndiye,</i>	Because He is the One
<i>Mwenye Baraka zote,</i>	With All the Blessings

As Nyairo (2015, 185) observes, this was the first time that “this kind of annexation was happening in the full glare of the state.” Thiong’o’s act affirmed the fact that the appropriation of gospel music for political capital has become the new normal in the country. It is fully integrated in the everyday life of every Kenyan, one’s faith notwithstanding. It is worth noting that the meaning and significance of songs change and/or morph into something else based on context and circumstances.

Indeed, the appropriation of gospel music for political expediency was replicated in the run-up to the 8 August 2017 general elections. The National Super Alliance (NASA) adopted a gospel song by Hellena Ken, “Mambo ya Badilika” (Things are Changing), as their national campaign anthem:

<i>Mambo, mambo yabadilika</i>	Things are changing
<i>Walio chini sasa, naona wakiinuliwa</i>	I see the downtrodden lifted up
<i>Walio nyuma sasa, naona wakiwa mbele</i>	I see the last becoming first
<i>Wanaodharauliwa, naona heshima zao</i>	I see honour for the despised
<i>Wanaolia sasa, machozi yanapanguzwa</i>	The tears wiped for the grieving
<i>Wanaolia sasa, machozi wanapanguza</i>	The grieving are wiping their tears
<i>Waliokataliwa, sasa wakubalika</i>	The rejected are being accepted
<i>Wasio na makao, wapata makao yao</i>	The homeless are getting homes
<i>Wasio na amani, wapata amani yao</i>	Those without peace are getting it back
<i>Wasio na furaha, wapata furaha yao</i>	The sad are getting back their joy
<i>Kwani mambo, mambo yabadilika</i>	Because things are being made new
Chorus	
<i>Naomba mambo yakibadilika</i>	I see things transforming
<i>Yabadilika kwa wema wako</i>	They transform because of your goodness

The message of change and restoration in the song resonated well with how NASA framed its campaign, which focused on changing the political, economic, and social architecture of the country's system of governance. Odinga, the NASA leader, further used biblical allusions to amplify the message of change and rebirth in the country, as implied in "Mambo ya Badilika."

Memes, Cartoons and the Journey to Canaan

John Lonslade (2009, 60) observes that in Kenya, "the Old Testament is generally regarded as the main Biblical archive in which to search for prophetic statements of truth to power." To substantiate this supposition, Lonslade cites Isaiah 1:18, in which God called on a rebellious Israel to "reason together" with Him, as a verse which was used to justify the clamour for multiparty democracy in Kenya. Indeed, the NASA presidential candidate, Raila Odinga, being among the people who agitated for multiparty democracy, invoked this historical gem during the 2017 election campaigns when he made metaphorical allusions to the Israelites' journey to Canaan, as documented in the book of Joshua in the Old Testament.

This section explores the deployment of the metaphoric journey motif in the 2017 general elections, which was couched in the biblical analogy of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to Canaan. The Kenyan electorate has had an inherent desire for freedom right from the struggle for independence. However, practices and activities of post-independence governments have stifled the hopes and aspirations for freedom, leading to the despondence and apathy evident among the majority of Kenyans. With this background and a quest to marshal the Kenyan electorate to his side, Odinga integrated the Israelites' journey from Egypt to Canaan in his campaign speeches. This is where we see the aesthetic quality of popular arts (Barber 1997; Newell 2002) as politicians borrow biblical discourses to transform themselves into imaginary heroes. In the journey metaphor, Odinga equated what Kenyans were experiencing in their lives to the bondage that Israelites underwent in Egypt. He elaborated the metaphor further to include the struggles of liberation in Kenya. According to him, the fight against

colonialism was the first liberation, and the push for political space and personal freedom that culminated in the promulgation of the 2010 Constitution was the second liberation. He opined that these two liberation struggles signified a major milestone in the Kenyan journey to nationhood. Mildred Mortimer (1991, 169) states that “the voyager holds a promise of transformation, of broader horizon and a deeper knowledge.” As voyagers, Kenyans seek the opening of spaces for freedom in political, social, and economic spheres. This idea seems to recur in every generation as a movement. Framed as a message of hope, the journey to Canaan took the electorate by storm and sent shockwaves to the ruling party.

The Jubilee government’s tenure had been riddled with widespread denunciations of mismanaging the economy, endemic corruption, ethnic bias, nepotism, increased extra-judicial killings and unequal distribution of national resources. It is worth noting that the 2017 general election also took place in a difficult socio-economic context in the country. This included high food prices, a shortage of maize flour or *unga* (the national staple), high youth unemployment and a cold war between the government and human rights organisations. All these put a dent in the Jubilee government’s ability to provide security to the general citizenry and to spur development in the country. At the time of his quest for presidency, the opposition leader Raila Odinga thus portrayed himself as Joshua—who took over from Moses—in his quest to lead Kenyans to the Promised Land of Canaan, described by the founders of the nation as a society in which all enjoy equal rights and opportunities. Thus, Odinga cultivated a narrative that demonstrated that his father and other opposition leaders in the earlier period of Kenyan history were representative of the struggle for the first liberation, just like the biblical Moses. This justified his role as Joshua, whose responsibility it was to complete the second liberation journey. Raila Odinga, like Joshua, gave the electorate hope that all the tribulations they experienced at the time would come to an end on 8 August 2017, when they cross over to the Promised Land. Campaigning on a populist ticket, he promised that he would address historical injustice and socio-economic marginalisation, create jobs, and lower food prices. He clearly spelled out his role in the final campaign rally at Uhuru Park in Nairobi:

I will be a president who only takes you across river Jordan because the Israelites are already out of Egypt and on the shores of Shama, through the jungle of Sinai and now they are on the banks of Jordan. I will be the Joshua to take them across river Jordan to Canaan. Once you get to Canaan, my task will be over. (Odinga 2017)

Uhuru Park is emblematic of Kenya’s independence as denoted by the meaning of the Swahili word *uhuru*, meaning freedom. While addressing people within a space that signifies freedom and exemplifies what he sought to achieve through the Canaan journey, Odinga defined his role as that of a transitional political leader, insinuating that Joshua in the Bible was only meant to complete the journey that Moses began and so was he. While the Biblical Joshua undertook his journey through a physical travel across the Jordan River, Odinga, the Kenyan Joshua, sought to undertake a symbolic travel

over a five-year presidential term to fulfil his promises and transform the country into a Canaan, a land of promise.

With an increasingly digital savvy population in Kenya, politically charged discourses and banter dominated online platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. These platforms are spaces where, according to Nyairo and Ogude (2005), social boundaries are dissolved to make way for the poor and the elite to share popular art forms. Political candidates hired “digital teams” to help boost their online profiles and mobilise supporters on social media networks. Candidates further embraced the use of digital media by constantly uploading posts, images, and videos about their political campaigns. As the campaigns heated up, memes were constantly created, remixed, and shared as political events unfolded. Internet users during this period were heavily engaged in content creation of a satirical and playful participatory nature. This gives credibility to the assertion that the people are key participants in the creation, consumption and dissemination of popular art forms (Barber 1997; Hall 1992). The journey to Canaan dominated most of the 2017 election memes. Supporters of Odinga had a very strong presence on Twitter, and they created memes based on the analogy of an exodus to Canaan (the Promised Land) by the Israelites in the Bible—using the #Canaan memes to illustrate Odinga’s ever-elusive victory at the ballot box (referencing the 2007 and 2013 elections). In their analogy, Canaan was a transformed Kenya that would be ruled by Odinga—often referred to as “baba” (Swahili word for father). The “Canaan movement” was among the topics that trended the most on Twitter during the electioneering period in 2017, as users laid out plans about their final destination (Canaan) and for celebrating their arrival.

The online political mobilisations morphed into two solid groupings. Those allied to Odinga and the opposition were commonly referred to as the Canaanites or NASArates, while those allied to Kenyatta and the Jubilee Party were referred to as Jubilants. Both the Canaanites and Jubilants engaged in heated exchanges and active imaginations regarding the journey to Canaan on social media sites. One topic that sparked imaginations was the means of transport that Kenyans would use to enter Canaan. The means of transport imagined for this journey included walking, flying, and using public transport—trains and taxis. The tweets came in both pictorial form and in words. One of the memes captures Odinga leading a large crowd. In his hand, he carries a stick such as that of Moses in the Bible leading his people to the land of Canaan. In another picture

(Figure 1) he looks like a Roman soldier with a sword, spear, and a shield—with his newfound name Joshua Rao—leading a multitude to Canaan:

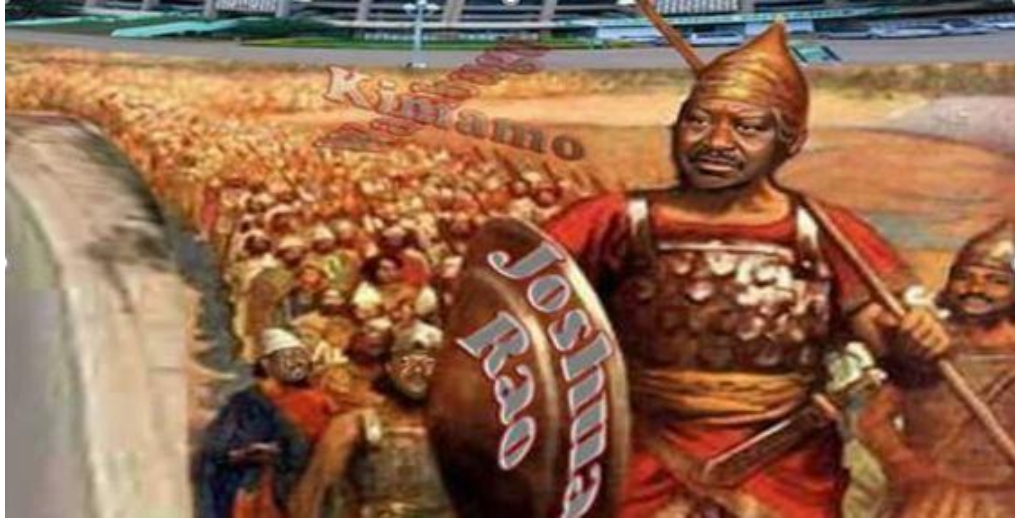


Figure 1: Raila Odinga as a Roman soldier. Courtesy of @VictorKipronoK1 (2017)

In the meme, the Canaanites are seen to be undertaking the journey like the Israelites, on foot, led by their leader Odinga. He is presented as a leader who carries symbols of authority as interpreted from the Bible in the form of a sword or a walking stick. The meme shows a large crowd portraying the large following that their leader is assumed to command. Bayart (1993) speaks of social strategies employed in governing the mentality of the masses and this is clearly the case with this meme. This journey in which the masses are trekking, despite it being the most basic and rudimentary means of mobility, exemplifies solidarity in numbers, as pictorially captured. Despite other means of transport being popular, this form shows a popular movement buoyed by people's enthusiasm to undertake the journey despite challenges, as opposed to individualistic and class-based segregation in the choice of taxis or airplanes.

In one of the memes, however, Odinga is shown to have made a temporary exit from the journey to Canaan. The Jubilants seized this opportunity to hit back at their opponents. They quipped that Odinga's absence was deemed failure of responsibility. In a meme appearing in a tweet, a crowd carrying umbrellas is captured stranded at a big river with the caption, "NASArates stranded at river Jordan. *Na JOSHUA amezima simu*" (and Joshua has switched his phone off). Instead of Joshua being there to help the NASArates to cross the river, he had disappeared. In this regard, Odinga is shown as one who would abandon his followers. The meme sought to show the opposition leader as undependable and therefore not worthy of being elected. Popular art is shown here to have a didactic function (Barber 1997): to caution Kenyans not to put their hopes in the opposition. Odinga's opponents seemed to recognise the idea of a Canaan journey and the need for it, but only casted aspersions on its leader.

The hysteria that the journey to Canaan created in the country throughout the campaign period, however, slowly melted into despair and hopelessness when the presidential results were formally declared. On 11 August 2017, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) declared incumbent Uhuru Kenyatta, leader of the Jubilee Party, the winner of the presidential poll by 8.2 million votes (54.3%) to 6.8 million (44.7%). There was utter disbelief in the NASA leadership and their supporters as it dawned on them that the electorate had decided that it was not yet time to go to Canaan. The confusion that gripped opposition supporters when the Jubilee candidate was declared duly elected President of the Republic of Kenya for the second term is best exemplified by the cartoon panel depicting the NASA leadership below (Figure 2):



Figure 2: Confused NASA principals after the August 2017 presidential elections outcome (*The Daily Nation*, 15 August 2017)

In the cartoon panel, the four NASA principals are seen to be pulling into different directions. While Odinga (left) gestures towards Canaan, Kalonzo Musyoka and Moses Wetangula (right) are gesturing towards going back to Egypt, whereas Musalia Mudavadi (centre) is just exasperated and therefore does not know which direction to take. The cartoon panel shows that the four principals were not reading from the same script. Political commenters have argued that the NASA coalition was an amorphous grouping of individuals whose personal interests and self-preservation overrode the overarching ideology underlying their political unity. The cartoon panel, therefore, cast aspersions on the overall intent and leadership of the journey to Canaan, since some of the principals were intending to surrender upon realising that the journey is intolerable.

The politically framed journey to Canaan came to a tumultuous halt at Uhuru Park on 31 January 2018 in the then touted NASA “swearing-in” ceremony. Courage is what millions of NASA supporters demanded of their leaders, but only Odinga showed up for the ceremony while his co-principals, Kalonzo Musyoka, Musalia Mudavadi and Moses Wetangula, were nowhere in sight. The following cartoon panel depicts Odinga abandoned by his compatriots (Figure 3):



Figure 3: Three NASA principals scamper for safety leaving Raila Odinga to drown at 31 January 2018 “swearing-in” ceremony (*The Daily Nation*, 2 February 2018)

The “swearing-in” ceremony, parodied as a farce by many, was a watershed moment for the NASA principals to demonstrate their unity of purpose. Undoubtedly, the “swearing-in” ceremony was unconstitutional and seditious, as the former Attorney General Githu Muigai brazenly stated (Kiplagat 2017). In the ceremony, Odinga stood as a man apart from his co-principals who yielded to the pressure of the moment, much to the chagrin of their supporters countrywide. It should be noted that Odinga’s disobedience and resistance, read here as political intolerance, reinforced his untouchable status in the country, as his nickname *Agwambo* (the unrivaled) indicates, and conquered the fear of his own political death in one transcendental moment.

Curiously, the majority of NASA supporters had transformed in the run-up to the 31 January 2018 “swearing-in” ceremony. They were not petrified to die for the political course they believed in. The word on the street was “touch Raila and the country burns.” A feature in *The Standard* newspaper on 3 January 2018 observed that NASA supporters were planning for their own funerals while alive as a precautionary measure before

engaging in the political protest. The newspaper feature quotes a NASA supporter interviewed as saying: “I do not know if it is my turn today but I beseech you my friends, when I go down, do not let the ground that has fed on millions of bodies feast on mine in Langata [cemetery]. Send me off with honour” (Akello 2018). This illustrates that political intolerance in the country was at fever pitch at the time. Political tensions had risen significantly to the extent that die-hard supporters were willing to lose their lives. The situation was aggravated by widespread rumours that thousands of NASA supporters were to storm State House after the “swearing-in” ceremony in the name of a people’s coup. The country, thus, breathed a collective sigh of relief when thousands of NASA supporters left Uhuru Park to their homes peacefully after the “swearing-in” ceremony was done.

Conclusion

This article contributes to an important body of work that gives agency to Kenya’s cultural economy as a site through and within which to engage the political. In Kenya, as in many other African countries, popular art remains an important site of political practice. Artists, politicians and the public regularly mobilise widely shared cultural repertoires to interpret and conduct politics. Focusing attention on Kenya’s electoral politics, this article has examined creative artistic productions including popular and religious music as well as the appropriation of biblical allusions by political actors, extending the discussion to reflect on political intolerance in Kenya. That politicians rely on the power of popular music to stimulate the general public during election campaigns cannot be gainsaid. Thus, every general election in Kenya elicits the creation and deployment of various popular forms of expression. Artists strategically position themselves to benefit from the elections both in monetary terms and popularity. It is, therefore, possible to argue that “Tibim” was prompted by the 2017 general elections and enjoyed unparalleled airtime in the campaign period as a result of Onyi Jalamo’s strategic positioning. This can also be said of Hellena Ken’s song “Mambo ya Badilika,” which enjoyed nationwide popularity during the election campaigns because its message of change and restoration echoed the NASA coalition’s theme of change. As this article has shown, artists, however, do not have a monopoly on the multiple interpretations that their creative works might be subjected to by the political class during the campaign period. The political class’s hijacking of these art works and the multiple meanings that they ascribe to them are a testimony to the fact that popular art forms as texts are susceptible to varying interpretations based on their mixed reception. It is these various elucidations by the political class from opposing political leanings that trigger political intolerance. Thus, the thoughts and emotions that popular arts generate are dependent on their deployment and how various groups unpack the language used in them. Effectively, popular art forms are open to new vistas of inquiry on how they articulate and reconfigure various issues in society.

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