

The Continent

The other Guinea-Bissau



PHOTO: JASON PATINKIN



COVER Even in this newspaper, Guinea-Bissau does not get a lot of attention. And when the West African nation is mentioned at all, it is usually in connection with political instability and organised crime. But a new arts and culture biennale – ‘West Africa’s most improbable art event’, in the words of our visiting correspondent – is generating headlines for different reasons. Read on page 13.

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A new us, two centuries in:

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THE WEEK IN BRIEF

MIGRATION

EU's border controls keep those at sea in peril

Police in the Caribbean archipelago of St Vincent and the Grenadines say they discovered a boat wreck carrying the remains of 11 people and several Malian passports. Five months ago, another vessel believed to carry Malian passengers was found in nearby St Kitts and Nevis with 19 bodies. With patrols blocking other routes, people attempt to go to Europe via the more perilous “Atlantic route”. The UN said at least 12 shipwrecks happened on that route between January and March 2024.

ZIMBABWE

Don't touch that dial (till you cough up \$92)

Motorists in Zimbabwe will be expected to pay an annual licence fee of \$92 for the radios in their vehicles. Proof of this fee's payment will be required to insure one's vehicle, as mandated by a new law signed by President Emmerson Mnangagwa this week. The levy is intended to support the state broadcaster, but according to the *BBC* it has angered some motorists, presumably outraged by the price they will have to pay to have government propaganda played at them.



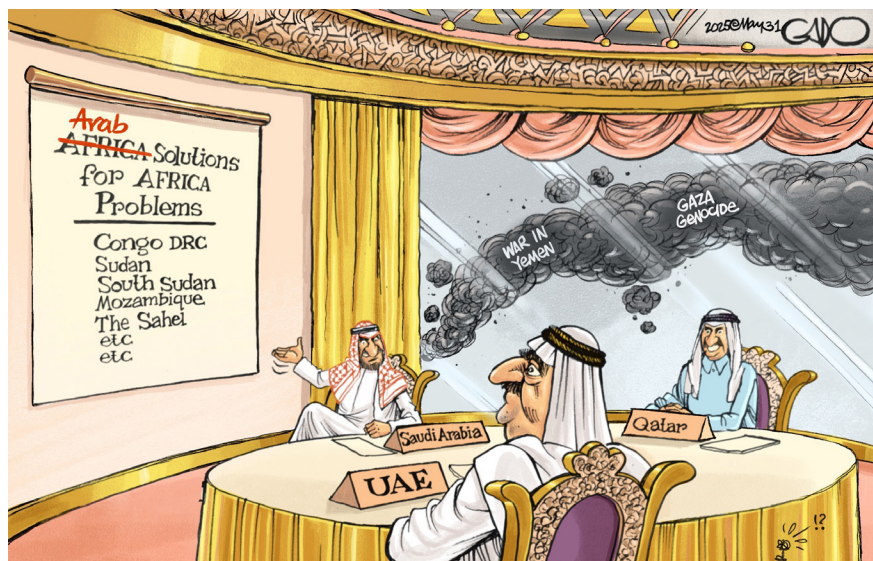
PHOTO: RODGER BOSCH/AFP

Bad medicine: Kelly Smith sold her daughter off to be carved up by a spiritual practitioner.

SOUTH AFRICA

Mother gets life after selling child for parts

In a case that has gripped the nation, a South African mother and two accomplices were sentenced to life imprisonment on Thursday for trafficking her then-six-year-old daughter. Her child, Joshlin Smith, is still missing. Prosecutors say that for R20,000 (\$1,100), Kelly Smith (the mother), Jacquen Appollis (the mother's boyfriend) and Steveno Van Rhyn (a friend to the couple) kidnapped and sold the girl to a sangoma (or traditional healer) who wanted her “eyes and skin”.



NAMIBIA

Remembering victims of Germany's first genocide

On Wednesday, for the first time ever, Namibia observed an official Genocide Remembrance Day to honour the victims of the 1904 - 1908 German genocide against the Herero and Nama people. Through mass executions, forced displacement, and starvation, German colonial soldiers killed tens of thousands but Germany only officially acknowledged the atrocities as genocide in 2016. In 2021 it then pledged to give €1.1-billion over 30 years in an agreement that refers to the money as development aid, not reparations. It does not go to the direct descendants of the victims.

SENEGAL

Protesters force Israeli Ambassador off campus

An invitation to speak about international relations at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar went awry for Yuval Wak, Israel's ambassador in Senegal. Before he could deliver his speech, student protesters waving the Palestinian flag and chanting "Free Palestine" entered the venue, forcing him to power-walk off campus as students heckled. Across the pond, the United States government has frozen visa applications for international students as it prepares "guidance" on social media sleuthing to weed out those who might chant "Free Palestine" on American soil.

GHANA

Embassy in US on (thin) ice over visa scandal

Ghana's embassy in Washington DC has been temporarily closed. The country's foreign affairs minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa cited a visa scam as the reason, saying an audit revealed that embassy staff were redirecting applicants to a private firm that charged them unapproved fees and pocketed the proceeds. The five-year scheme appears to have relied on an unauthorised link on the official embassy website. Staff have been recalled or suspended, and the case has been referred for prosecution.

MALAWI

Rising mpox cases linked to US aid cuts

Three new mpox cases have been reported in Malawi's capital Lilongwe, bringing confirmed infections to 11 since April. According to *The Guardian*, the outbreak is linked to patients whose treatment was disrupted when the United States cut foreign funding for HIV care. HIV increases the severity of mpox. Mpox testing and vaccines are also in short supply. The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention has reported over 52,000 cases and 1,770 deaths in 2025 in 16 African countries.

DRC

Amnesty: Targeting 'collaborators' is a war crime

The M23 rebel group killed, tortured and disappeared detainees in Goma and Bukavu whom they accused of "collaborating" with the Congolese army, says a new report by Amnesty International. Other detainees are being held without charge or contact with relatives even as they reportedly face starvation. These actions constitute war crimes, Amnesty said on Tuesday. Having seized the cities, the M23 group is running Bukavu and Goma but they remain internationally recognised territories of the Kinshasa government, which the detainees are accused of working for.

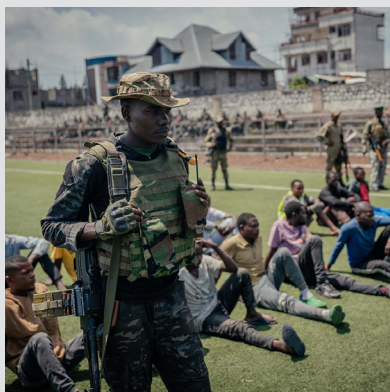


PHOTO: JOSPIN MWISHA/AFP

Field day: An M23 soldier at the Stade de l'Unité in Goma stands guard next to civilians accused of committing crimes in the city.

GEOPOLITICS

US military in Africa beats a hasty retreat

The United States is reviewing the future of Africom, the military command through which it has prosecuted its “war on terror” in Africa since 2008. It is encouraging African governments to prepare for “independent operations” and greater “burden sharing”, according to the *Associated Press*. “We have our set priorities now – protecting the homeland. And we’re also looking for other countries to contribute,” General Michael Langley, the top US military official in Africa, told the *AP*.

MOROCCO

Sell it if you got it, but don’t you be smoking

The *North Africa Post* reports that Morocco completed its legal framework for authorised cannabis trade by gazetting comprehensive regulations this month. Recreational use (like smoking kif, Morocco’s signature mix of tobacco and cannabis) remains forbidden but registered weed farmers can sell to approved facilities. As reported in *The Continent*, Morocco legalised cannabis for medical, pharmaceutical and industrial use in 2021, at which time 55,000 hectares of the marginalised Rif area were already being used to grow cannabis illegally.



PHOTO: SIMONE M. NEUMANN

SENEGAL

Hunters becomes the hunted in Dakar

The government led by Bassirou Diomaye Faye and Ousmane Sonko has arrested former minister Amadou Mansour Faye, on charges that he embezzled over \$4.6-million, denied him bail and sent him to prison. Mansour Faye was the minister of community development in the government of Macky Sall, who is also his brother-in-law. *RFI* reports that he is the fifth official from the previous administration to be charged by the current administration. President Diomaye Faye and his firebrand prime minister Sonko were imprisoned by the former administration and released only days before their election.

NEWS

FINANCE

Farewell Adesina, hello Ould Tah

CHRISTINE MUNGAI

SIDI Ould Tah of Mauritania was elected the new president of the African Development Bank Group (AfDB) at the bank’s annual meeting, held this week in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire.

He takes over from bowtie-clad Nigerian economist Akinwumi Adesina who has served two terms, during which the AfDB’s capital increased from \$93-billion in 2014 to \$318-billion.

The AfDB gives direct loans and grants to African governments and, through other financial instruments, sometimes underwrites their loans from other lenders. It focuses on supporting major projects in infrastructure, agriculture, energy, and other critical sectors.

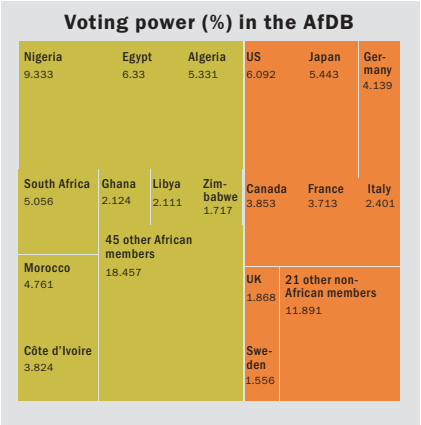
Ould Tah previously served for 10 years as the president of the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA) for 10 years from 2015, quadrupling the bank’s balance sheet and securing a AAA rating.

The Mauritanian’s tenure starts on shaky geopolitical ground. The US is the bank’s third largest shareholder, after Nigeria and Egypt, followed by eight other Western powers who together hold nearly a quarter of the shares. This doesn’t bode well at a time when the

Trump administration is retreating from multilateral institutions and isolationist sentiment is growing across the West.

But this moment may also open a window for the bank to become the primary lender to governments on the continent, drawing them away from Western finance markets that charge African countries an unjust risk premium. An Africa No Filter study estimated that African countries pay an extra \$4.2-billion each year on loans because of this.

Ould Tah’s presidency could be an opportunity to bring Africa fairer and more autonomous financing. If the centre holds. ■



OBITUARY

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1938 - 2025

JACQUELINE NYATHI

In 1964, after Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o had published *Weep Not, Child*, he entered a club in Nairobi and everyone mistook him for the author of *Things Fall Apart*.

He later told Wole Soyinka that Chinua Achebe's name had "haunted his life". Soyinka said that he, too, had been mistaken for Achebe. All towering figures in their own right, the three were also a tribe: "Writers for whom literature and politics were inextricable," as editor and author Bhakti Shringarpure says.

Aged 87, Ngũgĩ passed away on 28 May in the United States after a long illness. That he died in the US should be an indictment of our postcolonial states and their inability to live with writers who fight the good fight.

Ngũgĩ suffered great persecution from the Kenyan government for his work, first under Jomo Kenyatta, and then Daniel arap Moi. In 1977 he spent a year in Kamiti Maximum Security Prison for writing, in Gikũyũ, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), which the Kenyatta government considered subversive. His 1981 novel, *Caitani Mũtharabainĩ* (*Devil on the Cross*) was also written there – on toilet paper. In 1982, he was forced into exile when, in London for a book launch, Ngũgĩ learnt of a plot against him back in Kenya.



PHOTO: LEONARDO GENDAMO/GETTY IMAGES

After his novel *Matigari* was published in Kenya in 1986, the Moi government confiscated all copies (and tried to arrest Matigari, a fictional character). In 2003, Ngũgĩ returned to launch *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*Wizard of the Crow*): armed gunmen attacked him and his wife at their hotel, an attack he saw as political.

Ngũgĩ spent his final years teaching in the US, a bitter irony for a writer focused on decolonisation. His most recent book, *Decolonizing Language and Other Revolutionary Ideas* – out this month – reprises and reinforces this focus. Talk that he walked by writing in Gikũyũ for most of his career – English versions of his books are often translations. ■

MALAWI

Zuneth Sattar hit with 'state capture' charges

JACK MCBRAMS IN LILONGWE

IN A SCANDAL likened to that of the Guptas in South Africa, a British-Malawian businessman has been indicted in the United Kingdom on 18 counts of bribery. Zuneth Sattar is accused of orchestrating a sprawling corruption network in Malawi.

The charges, filed in Westminster on Friday, place Sattar at the centre of what prosecutors describe as an elaborate scheme to secure multimillion-dollar contracts by bribing senior Malawian public officials.

The indictment follows a multi-year investigation by the UK's National Crime Agency, and marks the first time Sattar has faced criminal proceedings over the allegations.

The charges relate to events between 2020 and 2021, when Sattar allegedly used his UK-registered company, Xavier Limited, and a network of shell companies to funnel bribes to powerful Malawian figures in exchange for inflated government contracts – mostly for military, police and immigration equipment.

Among the high-profile officials

named in court documents as alleged beneficiaries are Malawi's late vice president Saulos Chilima (who died in a plane crash in 2024); State House chief of staff Prince Kapondamgaga; and former top cop George Kainja. Even the former head of the country's Anti-Corruption Bureau, Reyneck Matemba, has been implicated.

If convicted, Sattar faces prison time, fines, and potential asset forfeiture.

Though Malawian authorities had previously frozen Sattar's accounts and arrested officials linked to him, they failed to extradite or prosecute him.

In a national address in 2022, President Lazarus Chakwera admitted over \$150-million in contracts were awarded to Sattar-linked companies from 2017 to 2021, largely by the police and defence forces.

He pledged sweeping procurement and governance reforms. But the domestic investigation has since stalled. Some suspects were released on bail, while others challenged their arrests.

Sattar denies any wrongdoing, and his legal team in London is expected to contest the charges on jurisdictional and evidentiary grounds. ■

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GUINEA

President's nemesis carted off to prison after calling out military abductions

Aliou Bah asked religious leaders to break their silence on the disappearance of political activists and called the military junta incompetent. He will now spend two years in prison.

TANGI BIHAN IN CONAKRY

POLICE blocked journalists and several dozen supporters of the Liberal Democratic Movement from entering the Conakry Court of Appeal to hear the judge deliver the verdict.

It was one of Aliou Bah's lawyers, Galissa Hady Diallo, who would announce it to the anxious crowd: "The judge merely stated that she fully upholds the ruling made by the court of first instance," he said after the Wednesday session.

Supporters of the detained political leader shouted in response: "Down with Guinean justice! Down with injustice!"

Bah, a political outsider who has become one of the main symbols of resistance to General Mamadi Doumbouya's rule, was first sentenced in January.

The two year prison terms followed charges that he had offended and

defamed Doumbouya. The offence was a reported Bah remark made about the military group ruling the country, officially named the National Committee of Reconciliation and Development, calling it incompetent.

He criticised what he saw as a lack of transparency in how the government is managing a \$20-billion mining project, Simandou.

Bah also reportedly called on religious leaders to speak out about the enforced disappearances of activists. Foniké Mengué and Billo Bah, leaders of a protest movement, disappeared in July, and journalist Habib Marouane Camara has also not been seen since December.

Witnesses and their lawyers say that all were abducted at night by men in military uniforms.

The authorities denied any involvement in their disappearances and have pegged Bah's prosecution for defamation on the claims.

Stuck choices

After the verdict on Bah's appeal was announced, police vans pulled up to the entrance of the court to take him away, preventing journalists from taking photographs. Bah could still be seen as he was driven back to Conakry's main prison, raising his fist as his supporters chanted, "President! President!"

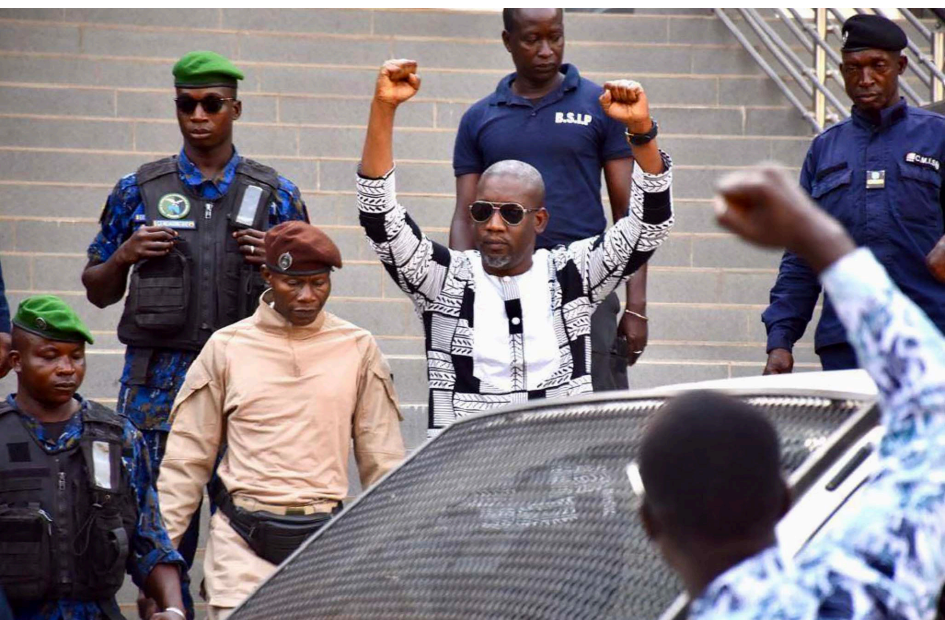
His lawyer and party officials said they had not yet given up the legal battle. They plan to appeal to Guinea's Supreme Court and have petitioned the regional Ecowas court.

The Conakry court outcome highlights the stark choices facing critics of the junta: exile or prison. Major leaders fled Guinea, including Cellou Dalein Diallo,

Sidya Touré, and former president Alpha Condé – whom Doumbouya replaced in a 2021 coup. The vacuum propelled the hitherto little-known Bah to prominence.

Abductions have continued during Bah's imprisonment. Another civil society leader, Abdoul Sacko, was kidnapped in February from his home in Conakry, tortured and abandoned in a field, about 100km from the city.

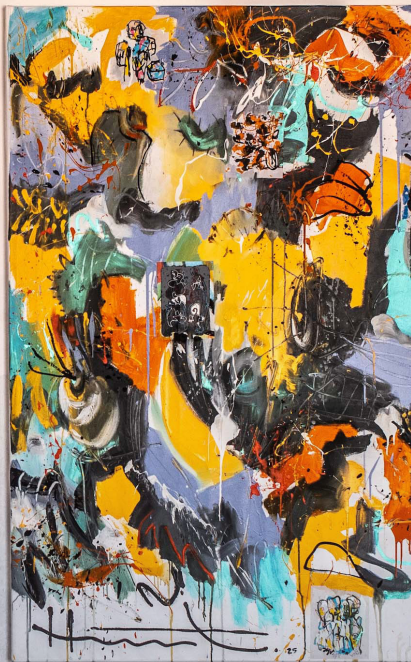
The court outcome also arrests Bah's political trajectory, as he will likely be in prison during the elections scheduled for late 2025. With other political leaders in exile, Doumbouya is expected to win the election with little opposition. ■



Junta's wrath: Aliou Bah after at an earlier appearance.

PHOTO: ALIOU BAH/FACEBOOK

CULTURE



Welcome to the Bissau Biennale

‘There is another Guinea-Bissau:
cultural, artistic, feeling, thinking, and
dreaming of a different tomorrow.’

JASON PATINKIN IN BISSAU

IN AN OLD sawmill-turned-art gallery in Guinea-Bissau's riverside capital, paint-splattered canvases and dreamlike photographs of forests and dancers adorn the walls. Video installations flicker in darkened corners. Dominating the warehouse-like space is *Big Kahombo*, an installation by Angolan artist Evan Claver. A critique of the promise of migration to the West, it's a stack of 24 plastic jerry cans painted with a crowd of faces on one side and a smirking woman next to the Statue of Liberty on the other.

In another room, ghostly blue and white images by Cabo Verdean artist Cesar Schofield Cardoso confront overfishing and plastic pollution in West Africa from foreign fishing fleets. Intricate textiles hang loosely from the rafters.

The old sawmill is the main exhibition hall of MoAC Biss, Guinea-Bissau's new arts and culture biennale which ran through May. The biennale joins a storied West African tradition stretching from the Black Arts festivals in Dakar and Lagos in the 1960s and 70s to today's massive Dakar Biennale and Burkina Faso's Fespaco film festival. MoAC Biss will be scheduled for odd-numbered years to avoid overlapping with the well-established Dakar Biennale.

The Bissau Biennale is perhaps West Africa's most improbable art event. Despite its rich history and culture, Guinea-Bissau has no contemporary art museums, art schools, or specialised art supply shops. Most aspiring Bissau-Guinean artists move abroad or choose other careers.

Though the MoAC Biss debut was much smaller than the region's other festivals, it brought together dozens of



artists and other creatives from across Lusophone Africa, Portugal, Brazil, Guadeloupe, the United States and beyond for near daily gallery openings, concerts, theatre performances, book launches, film screenings, and panel discussions, all free to the public.

The festival drew crowds that regularly exceeded venue capacity. On opening night, concertgoers leapt to their feet as classic Bissau band Furkuntunda reunited after nearly 20 years. Two days later, ushers struggled to contain enthusiastic fans flocking to hear Mozambican singer Selma Uamusse's rousing set of Afro-rock tunes.

But perhaps no one was as excited about the biennale's outpouring of creativity as the artists of Guinea-Bissau themselves.

Homecoming and reclamation

"It's a dream come true. Guinea-Bissau is my home, my ancestors' home, and I feel so glad to perform here," said Isabél Zuaa, who was born and raised in Europe to a Bissau-Guinean father and Angolan mother. Zuaa is part of Aurora Negra Collective, a trio of Lusophone African women who staged a standing-room only performance art piece exploring motherhood, femininity, Blackness, and post-colonial identity. Like most artists in MoAC Biss, it was Zuaa's first time showing in Guinea-Bissau.

Thayra Correia is a Bissau-born and Portugal-based designer of minimalist furniture who features in top festivals across Europe and beyond. She also had never exhibited in Guinea-Bissau until

MoAC Biss. "It's a completely different feeling," Correia said. "You are home, and you're making something for home, and with all that, taking into account that home has never had a chance to see it."

For her biennale collection, Correia embraced the concept of home, eschewing her usual metal and ceramic for indigenous wood and local fabrics. She worked with Bissau-Guinean artisans to build designs that fused traditional forms with her signature sleek style. The resulting artwork earned loud ovations on opening night, vindicating her chosen path. "Being an artist from Guinea-Bissau is an act of hope, it's an act of resistance," she said.

Correia hopes that the biennale's exhibition of Bissau-Guinean and other Black African artists like her proves to aspiring local creatives that "it is possible to be an artist, it is possible to work with art, it is possible to make a life out of it."

The MoAC Biss idea was born three years ago when a group of Guinea-Bissau intellectuals and artists – many of whom had left their country to pursue careers abroad – met for lunch and shared their frustrations with both their state of the country and its international image. "Look, it's bad. The face of a country that has cultural variety, many ethnic groups, much cultural wealth, but is instead known for coups d'état, for corruption, drug trafficking," said former culture minister Antonio Spencer Embaló, who was at the discussion. They decided to do something to tell a different story about their homeland. "There is another, cultural Guinea-Bissau. There is an



Blue yonder: Cabo Verde's Cesar Schofield Cardoso explores overfishing and pollution in his art.

artistic Guinea-Bissau. A Guinea-Bissau that feels, that thinks, that dreams of a different tomorrow," said Embaló who is now on the MoAC Biss organising team.

When they started floating the biennale idea, people told them they were crazy, "because no one goes to Guinea-Bissau," said acclaimed Paris-based artist Nu Barreto, who curated the visual arts programme. "Yes, no one comes here," he agreed. "But we have to make things, to create things, that people can come to see. That's our challenge."

Building a different tomorrow

In the run up to the festival, the organisers faced all manner of logistical challenges, from insufficient photo printing facilities, electricity shortages affecting video installations, the April blackout in Portugal and Spain which disrupted incoming artists' flights, and finding the money to run things. Unlike at other biennales which rely heavily on state financing, organisers did not seek

funding from the Guinea-Bissau state.

Despite those obstacles, the organisers created something new compared to most West African art festivals which focus on one discipline: visual arts, film, or music.

"Here we have a biennale that marks its identity first and foremost through its multidisciplinary nature," said Ousseynou Wade, who organised the Dakar Biennale six times. "It has exceeded even my expectations."

Barreto hopes MoAC Biss will encourage Guinea-Bissau's government to support future cultural projects. "That's still our mission to the government, to say to them, 'okay, come here to see what we're doing, it's positive,'" he said. After the biennale wraps, the old sawmill will continue to be a gallery and more buildings will be converted to studio space until the next edition of MoAC Biss.

"Bring the 2027 one," Correia said. "Because we are gonna be ready." ■

CULTURE

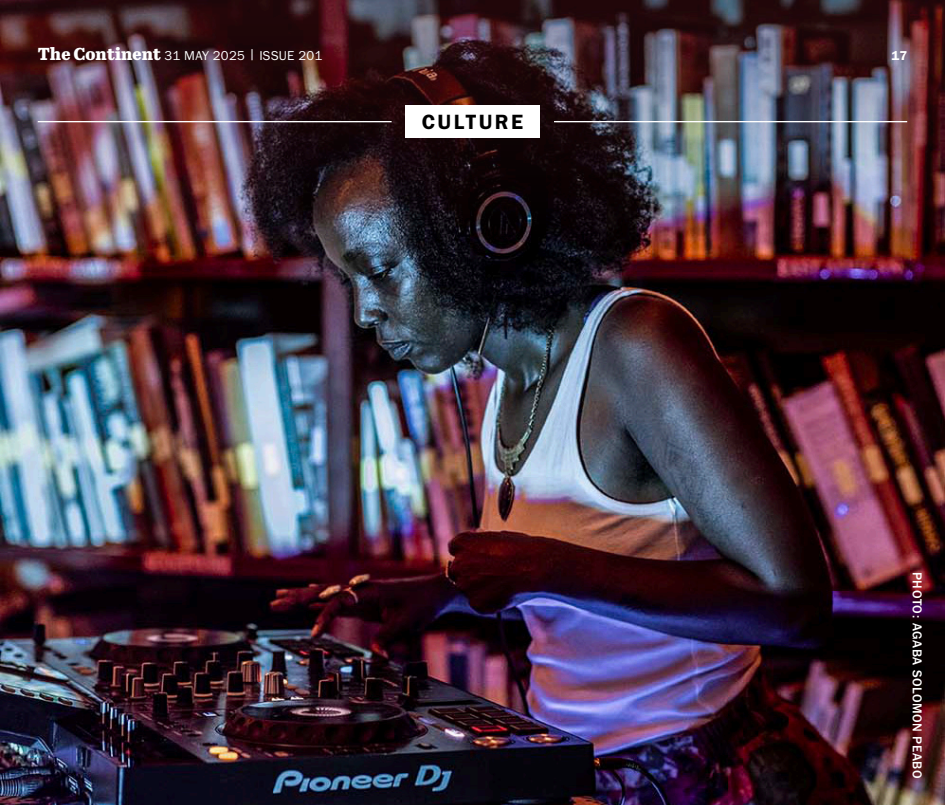


PHOTO: AGABA SOLOMON / PEARBO

A 24-hour rave to build Uganda's first contemporary art centre

'The antidote to despair is to do something. And to do it with your friends and community.'

HANNAH UGURU

KAMPIRE and Decay have just played a 24-hour back-to-back set. But the DJs want us to think about buildings, not the feat itself. The 23 to 24 May set, dubbed Fundraza 2, was livestreamed globally via Mixcloud and YouTube from 32° East, a contemporary art centre still

under construction in Kampala. The venue was packed. Children from the neighbourhood were dancing to the final hour. Friends brought food and coffee. Volunteers ran the bar and cleaned up bottles.

"It's the kind of space everyone feels at home in, and has a stake in what's going on," says Kampire.

At an overseas party in Brussels, 200 people showed up to dance to the livestream. A total audience of around 1,200 showed up throughout the day from places as far flung as Kenya, Japan, Brazil and Scotland.

"I definitely expected that there would be times when there was nobody watching, but that didn't happen at all. The numbers literally kept climbing throughout the 24 hours," Kampire says. "There was always someone there – friends, strangers, people from all over."

The party was both hyperlocal and international.

"We were really supported. People would come in and donate for requests and shout-outs," adds Decay. "And people on the livestream were doing this as well. It was just really nice. When your energy dipped, there was always some new exciting thing to keep you going."

The DJs were supporting a bid by 32° East to raise \$100,000 to complete its construction. With that money, says the centre's director, Tessa Bahana, they will build six studios, accommodation to host up to 24 artist residences a year, a café, workshops, an arts supplies shop, and an expanded library.

The centre, which in 2021 crowdsourced \$96,000 to break ground and build three shared studios and an exhibition space, is already an unusual institution in Uganda. The new facilities would make it the first and only one of its kind in Uganda: a permanent one-stop home for artists and connoisseurs to make, support and commune around art on a daily basis. And itself a monument

to what self-built cultural infrastructure looks like.

With limited communal facilities, Ugandan artists tend to work in isolation or congregate around the National Theatre – a colonial era state-owned institution that is often surveilled and sabotaged by its benefactor.

Visual artists in particular were for a long time relegated to packed stalls in the backyard of the National Theatre and a couple of Kampala tourist markets, as public art institutions like Nommo gallery were commandeered by state-connected artists and private galleries struggled to stay alive.

International diplomats sometimes support artists to exhibit in secluded high society spaces and in one case supported the building of Ndere Centre, a quasi-private institution for performing artists. But rich countries are now cutting soft power spending, and even before their retreat, their support didn't stretch far enough to cover the full depth and diversity of artistic work.

A radical reimagining

Tired of waiting on government grants or donor cycles, the two DJs put their bodies — and music — on the line.

"There were definitely moments during the weeks running up to the 24-hour stream, where I was like, 'why did I have this idea? Why did people agree to do this? Why didn't anyone tell me no?'" Kampire jokingly lamented two days after the set. "But now that we've done it, it was definitely worth it," she chuckled and Decay joined in. "It's a great way to

rally people in your physical space, but also to support us from everywhere and get new people involved,” added Kampire.

If this sounds extreme, it’s because it is. But Decay and Kampire are no strangers to unconventional action. They are members of the Nyege Nyege collective, known for Uganda’s biggest annual music festival. Its queer-affirming atmosphere triggers moral panic in the national Parliament each and every year. Last weekend’s 24-hour set was the sequel to one the pair did to support the 2021 campaign.

The centre is personal for Decay who also works as its programmes manager. “My artistic career was and is very entwined with 32° East. I don’t know if I would be a practising artist without the support that I got here,” she said. “I had my first artistic residency at 32° East. I also participated in the public arts festival, Klaart Festival, and some of the work I made during my residency was sold at an art auction series that the centre used to run,” she added.

It is just as personal for Kampire, whose sister, 32° East director Tessa, has nurtured the centre as a labour of love for nearly a decade.

Not bad for a weekend shift

The DJs raised over \$1,500 during the livestream alone and donations kept rolling in from the Brussels event and the wider campaign, which ran until Friday, 30 May. By mid-week, the campaign had passed the \$36,000 mark. For Kampire



PHOTO: TIMOTHY LATIM

Upwards: 32° East is located in Kabalagala, Kampala.

and Decay, “just sending out emails and Instagram requests” wouldn’t have done it. It took something people could physically or emotionally show up for to pool together that kind of money.

It did take a toll. “The second day after that, I just was so quiet, so subdued. I had no energy,” Decay laughs. “I felt like I had just run myself out,” she added.

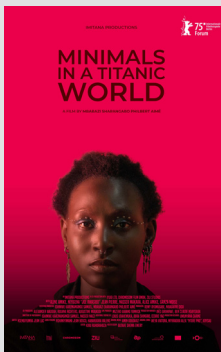
The 32° East team doesn’t plan on needing a Fundraza 3. The current campaign is intended to be their last major crowdfunding effort before transitioning into a fully self-sufficient model.

But the DJs hope their feat energises other dreamers. “The only antidote to despair is to do something. And to do something with your friends and your community,” says Kampire. ■



FILM REVIEW

WILFRED OKICHE



Sharangabo learns to bet on himself

After his big debut, the Rwandan filmmaker reflects on greenlighting one's own dreams, even before the gatekeepers do.

NOT MANY filmmakers get the opportunity to present their first feature film at the Berlin International Film Festival, one of the biggest film festivals in the world. This was exactly the rarefied situation that Rwandan filmmaker Philbert Aimé Mbabazi Sharangabo found himself in this

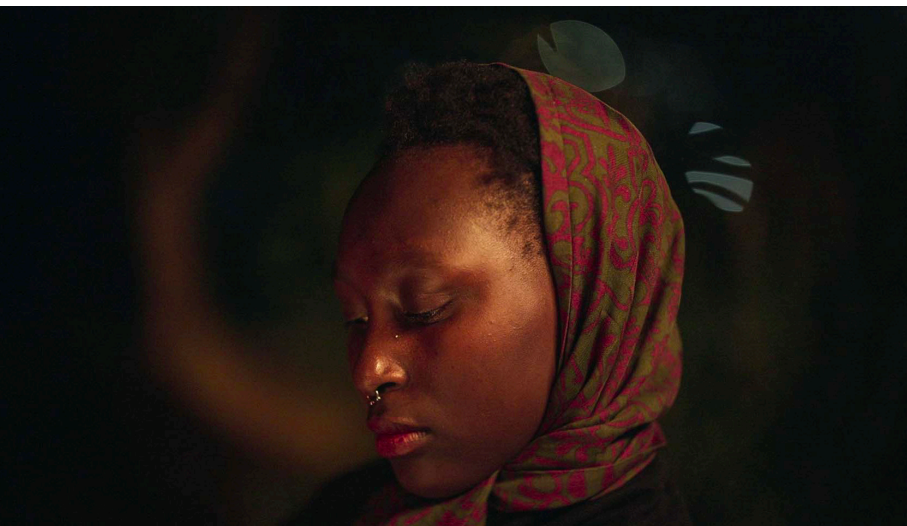
February with his modestly realised drama *Minimals in a Titanic World*.

"I am interested in outsiders," Sharangabo tells *The Continent*. "My characters are not on a spectacular or epic journey, and they aren't saving the world. But for the 80 minutes that we follow them, these small characters matter."

A contained reflection on grief, *Minimals in a Titanic World* was inspired by a contemplative short film titled *I Got My Things and Left*, which Sharangabo made in 2018.

His new work considers a close-knit group dealing with the sudden loss of their friend, and takes place mostly in the large, imposing house where they all live together – but there's also a significant Kigali nightlife scene where the protagonist Anita (Aline Amike), just out of prison for a petty crime, performs at a bar while hoping to kickstart a career as a songwriter.

Despite the loss and grief that grounds the film, it is also a celebration of life, a knotty tribute to the youth of Rwanda. The main characters of *Minimals in a Titanic World* can no longer afford the house that they live in. They depended on the generosity of their deceased friend, whose sudden passing ejected them from this bubble. Sharangabo's observant and expressive gaze captures a particular mood and lifestyle that is at once hopeful, yet challenged by



New song: Aline Amike as Anita in a still from *Minimals* in a *Titanic* World.

obvious economic and class realities. “I wouldn’t like to make a miserabilist film,” says Sharangabo. “I fell in love with cinema through characters, and it is very hard to admire or fall in love with a victim.”

Lead actress Amike, says that what she liked most about the role was the sheer willpower of the character Anita. “She is grieving but still making space to dream big, despite not having a lot to work with.”

As a first-time feature filmmaker, Sharangabo recognised that he had to bet on himself, he tells *The Continent*. “For us, it was about not waiting for better conditions. But we never really had any alternatives.”

Along with his producers, Sharangabo raised some initial funds in March 2023

and shot about 70% of the film before taking a production break to edit and to raise additional funds. Cast and crew lived in the house that appears in the film for most of the 23-day shoot. Ten months into the break, a complex balance of co-production agreements in Africa and Europe helped to raise post-production funds, enabling another 10 days of shooting in January 2024.

But Sharangabo didn’t skimp on labour ethics. “It was a low-budget film, but the idea was that everybody should be paid. I am sure we could have asked people to show up for free and they would’ve done it. But that’s not what we were aiming for.”

He stresses that younger filmmakers should greenlight themselves, and not wait on gatekeepers. ■

SERIES

Lilongwe, and how we hold the space we make



WORDS AND PHOTOS: JAMES JAMU

LILONGWE IS transforming slowly and quietly. Rural texture is giving way to burgeoning cityscapes as highways expand and new buildings rise. The future is arriving, but unevenly. People are making do, adapting in ways that defy both nostalgia and progress.

From the diaspora, peering back into the city, I sense anxiety, exhaustion, resistance and a nauseating silence in Lilongwe. When I return with my camera, I find myself held by overwhelming internal conflict. I have been relearning

photography, becoming more aware how the tools I use were shaped by colonial ways of seeing.

Decolonial criticism of photography says that the medium has focused too long and too much on African hardship. Is that a call to deny the hardship we witness and give the space to narratives of resilience, dignity and joy? That, too, feels like erasure.

I'm caught between the urge to illuminate struggle and the fear of reproducing trauma for spectacle. Desperately reaching for a way of seeing that neither flattens pain nor fetishises

survival. A way to hold complexity without collapsing it into hope or despair. The documentary effort becomes a deeply personal and conflicted attempt to witness Lilongwe anew.

With each frame, I grow more uncomfortable with the act of looking. My training in film theory and practice has disrupted how I understand the ethics of visibility.

Every photowalk is haunted by questions of how to show what is, without inscribing pity, exoticism or distance. How ought I to represent lives shaped by histories that photography

has often exploited?

The friction between my lens and conscience slows me down. I hesitate, to make space for the questions.

I hope these images hold that space too, making the viewer sit with the contradictions of a city suspended between alternate speeds: the modern world barrels forward but many of its residents remain rooted in something slower, not failing but being failed by systems, pace and forgetfulness.

Above all, I hope this is a meditation on how hard it is to see clearly, and how important it is to try anyway. ■











We Built This City is a limited series of photo essays by *The Continent* on African cities. This season, seven photographers will each share their unique view of the city they call home, and what it means to them.

➡ **EMAIL US**

What would you like us to explore and share with the world about your city?
Send your thoughts to photos@thecontinent.org

DATA

Empire state of mind

THE THEME of Sunday’s Africa Day (25 May) was “Justice for Africans and people of African descent through reparations”. It’s a pertinent time to ask: How do Africans see their former colonisers?

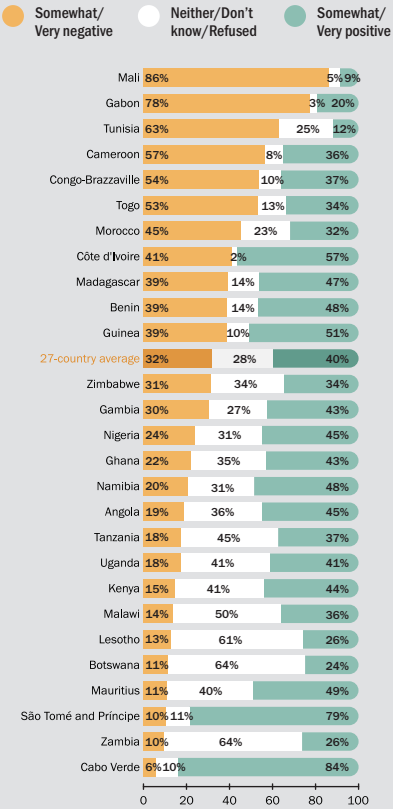
The answer is not what you might expect. On average, across the 27 countries we surveyed in 2024, people are more likely to say the political and economic influence of their former colonial power is positive than negative (40% vs 32%).

But the continental averages mask enormous variation across countries. Majorities in six countries formerly occupied by France say Paris continues to play a harmful role.

In contrast, two ex-Portuguese island territories view Lisbon in overwhelmingly favourable terms: Cabo Verde (84%) and São Tomé and Príncipe (79%). Angola, the other country in our list that was colonised by Portugal, also views it more positively than negatively (45% vs 19%).

Many Africans are just not sure: More than six in 10 in Botswana (64%), Zambia (64%) and Lesotho (61%), and half (50%) of Malawians, don’t take a position on British influence. ■

Economic and political influence of former colonial power | 27 African countries | 2024



Source: Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.

The Quiz

- 1 In which country is the Suez Canal located?
- 2 What are people from Guinea-Bissau called?
- 3 In which year did the genocide in Namibia begin?
- 4 Bassirou Diomaye Faye is which country's president?
- 5 Baidoa and Kismayo are cities in which country?
- 6 The Gidan Rumfa, or the palace of the Emir of Kano (pictured), is located in which country?
- 7 Joseph Kabila took presidential office in 2001. In which year did he leave office?
- 8 Which African film won the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film in 2006?
- 9 What does AfDB stand for?
- 10 Which player was just named the English Premier League player of the season?



HOW DID I DO?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

0-3

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

8-10

"Some palace gossip, you say? Go on, then – I'm all emirs."

PHOTO: KAHILI BROWN/X

Big Pic

Jewel of the desert: A worshipper enters a mosque in the oasis town of Oulata in Mauritania. Oulata is an ancient trade and religious centre that still guards treasured artefacts dating back to the Middle Ages.

PHOTO: PATRICK MEINHARDT/AFP



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