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# The Continent



## Biofuels: A new era of extraction

Illustration: Wynona Mutisi



### THIS WEEK'S COVER STORY:

To avert catastrophic climate change, the world needs African resources. Italy's energy giant Eni wants African farmers to grow the crops for the biofuels to power planes and ships — transport accounts for a quarter of all carbon emissions. It's rolling out a project with tens of thousands of farmers in at least six countries. It should mean a way for Africans to benefit from their labour. But a year-long investigation reveals how dispirited so many of the farmers are at how things are actually working out (p12).

## Inside:

- **Meddling:** Ghana tries to balance the West's right and left (p7)
- **Ghana:** The rise of opioids (p8)
- **Sexism:** 87% of Nigerian newspaper managers are men (p9)
- **Nigeria:** As the Naira collapses, the state attacks (p10)
- **Photo essay:** The streetwise life of Kampala's people (p17)
- **Review:** Afrosurrealism and Afrofuturism in *Womb City* (p23)



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**Off sides: Mali's skipper Hamari Traore has been censured for having a go at the ref in the Afcon quarters.**

Photo: Issouf Sanogo/AFP

## MALI

### Eagles captain's wings clipped

Mali football captain Hamari Traore has been given a four-match ban after being found guilty of “unsporting conduct” towards Egyptian referee Mohamed Adel during their Africa Cup of Nations quarterfinal against Côte d’Ivoire. Mali’s football federation was slapped with a \$10,000 fine for the behaviour of its players towards a match official. Côte d’Ivoire’s federation was also fined \$5,000 for its players’ misconduct during the match.

## KENYA

### \$30 ‘not-a-visa’ fee dropped for six more African countries

After President William Ruto announced visa-free travel to Kenya, travellers were confused to find that the country merely moved its visa registration online, rebranded it as “electronic travel authorisation” and introduced a uniform \$30 fee for all except East Africans. But this week, authorities lifted the \$30 fee for citizens of Congo-Brazzaville, Comoros, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mozambique, South Africa and the European nation of San Marino. One small step for border-free Africa. All travellers must however still register online before entering Kenya.

## COMOROS

### Ghazouani to chair AU after Assoumani

The president of Mauritania, Mohamed Ghazouani, has been elected as the new chairperson of the African Union for 2024. Ghazouani takes over from Azali Assoumani, the president of Comoros. With less on his plate, Assoumani can now focus on continuing his alleged jailing and exiling of political opponents. In January, Assoumani was re-elected for a fourth term in a disputed poll which the opposition described as “fraudulent”.

## UNITED KINGDOM

## Small boat pilot held responsible for migrant deaths

Ibrahima Bah, a Senegalese migrant, was found guilty of manslaughter for the deaths of four people who drowned when

the dinghy he was steering sank. Britain's prosecution service also found Bah had facilitated a breach of immigration law. This is the first time a migrant who piloted a small boat has been held responsible for harm caused to other occupants. Bah steered the dinghy in December 2022 in exchange for free passage from France to Britain.



Photo: ER Lombard/Gallo  
Images via Getty Images

## SOUTH AFRICA

## Cape Town engulfed by reeking miasma

Recently ranked the second-best city in the world, Cape Town can now add Eau de Poo to its list of tourist detractions. On Monday, a foul stench engulfed the "Mother City". The source? A live

export ship that had been docked at the city's harbour since Sunday evening. The *Al Kuwait's* cargo – 19,000 cattle – was on its way to Iraq from Brazil, stopping in Cape Town for animal feed. Animal welfare groups say the smell, an eye-watering mixture of excrement and ammonia, highlights the inhumane conditions under which animals are transported.

**HORN OF AFRICA****Somalia mortgages coast to Istanbul to keep Abiy at bay**

For 10 years, Türkiye will get 30% of all official revenue from the waters off Somalia's 3,300km coastline. In return, the Nato-member country will help Mogadishu rebuild its navy and defend the waters from piracy, terrorism and "foreign interference", according to an agreement approved by cabinet and Parliament this week. The agreement came weeks after Ethiopia announced plans to lease a 20km stretch of the same coastline from breakaway Somaliland, infuriating Somalia, whose president has described it as an attempt at "changing the borders of Somalia".

**GUINEA-BISSAU****President threatens media for reporting on 'coup attempt'**

The Committee to Protect Journalists called on Guinea-Bissau's president, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, to withdraw his threats against the media. These include accusing journalists of siding with the opposition and vowing to "end the anarchy that has seen anyone become a political commentator". In November, his national guard exchanged fire with the military, in what Embaló called a coup attempt and a bid "to kill the president, the prime minister and all the cabinet". Afterwards, he dissolved Parliament, and armed men raided the offices of television and radio stations.

**HAITI****First lady charged for president's murder**

The widow of Haitian president Jovenel Moïse was charged this week with complicity in his murder. Martine Moïse, former prime minister Claude Joseph and a former police chief Leon Charles, along with 47 others, are accused of playing some part in his death. No one has replaced Moïse since his assassination in 2021. Prosecutors allege Madame Moïse and Joseph conspired to do away with her husband in a bid for her to realise her own presidential ambitions.



**Death do us part: The late president of Haiti, Jovenel Moïse, who was assassinated in 2021, and his wife Martine.** Photo: Chandan Khanna/AFP

## AFRICAN UNION

## Donkey hide trade banned

During the recent African Union summit, the body approved a continent-wide ban on the trade of donkey hides; a move

welcomed by animal rights groups. Trade in donkeys is driven by the demand for collagen extracted from their hides. Although its efficacy is unproven, it is used to treat ailments such as anaemia, insomnia and infertility, and is said to enhance beauty and boost libido.



Photo: Eric Lafforgue/  
Art in All of Us/Corbis  
via Getty Images

## GHANA

## X gon' give it to ya (eventually)

A year after being let go, African staff axed by X (ex-Twitter) have been paid the severance they were promised. When Elon Musk took over Twitter in 2022 he cut its name and 6,000 jobs. At the time, X said ex-staff were paid in full but reps said it only began talks with axes after CNN covered the story.

## GUINEA

## Junta just can't stop couping itself

The military leaders who took power from Guinea's first democratically elected president, Alpha Condé, in September 2021, dissolved the interim cabinet of ministers they appointed. All bets are now off on the junta handing power over to a civilian government in December, as it had promised.

# Ghana

## Anti-gay bill becomes an imperialism loop problem

US far-right groups urged MPs into drafting anti-gay law, now Western dismay is giving them cold feet.

Marian Ansah

Passage of a bill first proposed in mid-2021 to expand Ghana's restrictions on its lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other queer (LGBTQ+) citizens, stalled again this week.

"To jail a person for his or her sexuality would not be the solution to maintaining our Ghanaian family values and ensuring proper human rights," said the then deputy leader of ruling party legislators, Afenyo Markin, in Parliament on Wednesday. He is now its leader.

He proposed replacing some of the prison sentences in the bill with mandatory counselling for LGBTQ+ people. But MPs voted against him. They nonetheless approved other proposed

amendments – meaning that it must be revised again, even though it was previously considered in detail and redrafted by the Parliament's legal affairs committee – and adjourned.

Gay sex in Ghana is already punishable by a three-year sentence. But in 2021, triggered by the opening of Ghana's first LGBTQ+ community centre, nine opposition MPs sponsored a new bill that includes harsh, broad and controversial measures. As *The Continent* previously reported, the bill's local promoters are linked to American far-right groups like the World Congress of Families. Victor Madrigal-Borloz, the United Nations Independent Expert on sexual minorities' rights, warned that the bill could fuel "state-sponsored discrimination and violence". The bill and debates around it have already driven a surge in violence against LGBTQ+ people.

The proposed law has dragged through Parliament, especially in recent months as Ghana watched the international backlash against Uganda as it also expanded anti-LGBTQ+ restrictions. The World Bank froze new funding to Uganda while the United States kicked the East African country out of the Agoa preferential trade deal. Ghana would want to avoid such reactions given that its economy is struggling so much that the president sacked his finance minister last week. ■

# Ghana

## Opioid crisis brings pain and death to the north

**Highly addictive Tramadol is being sold as a street drug.**

**Francis Kokutse**

**A** public health crisis is brewing in Tamale, the capital of Ghana's northern region, thanks to a rise in the misuse of Tramadol – a prescription opioid pain medication. Young people in particular are becoming addicted to the medication, which releases endorphins and blocks pain signals.

It's increasingly being sold as a street drug. And doses of Tramadol sold in street markets are typically two to five times higher than the standard prescribed dose, heightening its addictive potential.

The signs of large-scale use are clear on the streets of Tamale, with people staring blankly into the distance, or removing their clothes without reason or warning.

"The misuse of Tramadol has been with us for a while," said Eugene Dordoye, a psychiatrist at Ghana's Ho Teaching Hospital.

The problem is not isolated to Ghana. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reports that Africa "accounts for half of the quantities of pharmaceutical opioids, especially Tramadol, seized

globally between 2017 and 2021".

Misuse of Tramadol is still a relatively taboo subject and experts warn of real problems if a more nuanced approach to curbing abuse isn't adopted.

Olumuyiwa Omonaiye, co-author of a recently-published study by the Institute of Health Transformation at Deakin University in Australia, told *The Continent* that the impact of opioids isn't well documented in Africa. More research is needed to understand the long-term impacts of misuses, and then to work out the best interventions.

But there are tell-tale signs of a serious problem: "In recent years, authorities have observed a notable surge in the illicit use of Tramadol among younger populations in African countries, evident from the substantial quantities of this substance confiscated."

Researchers involved in that study are now calling for more targeted interventions to address the problem, maintaining that the non-medical use of Tramadol is a multidimensional issue with far-reaching economic, societal and safety implications. ■

# Nigeria

## Newsrooms are still (over-)run by men

**Just a quarter of the managers in Nigeria's media firms are women. And the proportion is even smaller in print media.**

**Justina Asishana**

Leadership and management roles in Nigeria's media sector are plagued by significant gender disparities, according to a new report by the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism. While the country's media ostensibly champions gender equality, a stark reality persists: men dominate the newsroom.

The report, published last week, found that while there are more women at mid-career levels, the gap widens towards leadership positions – often called the C-Suites. Among the 409 people in management positions across 111 sampled organisations, only 26.9% are women, while 73.1% are men. The widest gender gap exists in print media where 86.9% of managers are men compared to just 13.1% who are women.

While men predominantly occupy high-profile editorial roles such as editor-in-chief, managing director, and chairman of the editorial board, women are more commonly found in administrative, financial, legal and support positions.

“There is no justification for the imbalance that we see,” said Theophilus Abba, programme director of the Daily Trust Foundation, which provides scholarships to young journalists.

Motunrayo Alaka, chief executive of the Wole Soyinka Centre, said the centre plans to conduct “house-to-house” visits to media organisations to elaborate on the findings and suggest improvements such as implementing gender parity policies, improving the representation of women in news reporting, promoting gender-sensitive reporting, and increasing the presence of women expert sources.

Only then can Nigerian media represent the people they report on. ■



**Paper trail: Media do not reflect the society they report on.** Photo: Michele Spatari/AFP

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# Nigeria

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## Defending the naira with guns

**The bucks stop here. The state is desperate for someone to blame for a currency in freefall.**

**Adebayo Abdulrahman in Ibadan**

**T**he country is in one of its worst economic crises in recent years. In January, inflation in Nigeria rose to 29.9%, the highest in nearly three decades. And the state is looking for scapegoats.

Mallam Bashir, a Bureau de change operator at Sabo, a popular currency exchange market in Ibadan in southwest Nigeria, was at work on Wednesday morning before stepping out around noon. When he returned a few minutes later, officials of the department of state security and other law enforcement agencies had stormed the area.

“They just came in and started picking up everyone,” Bashir told *The Continent* on Thursday morning. He and others still don’t know how many were arrested.

Most of Nigeria’s foreign exchange

transactions happen on the street, where currencies are more likely to be available than they are at a bank – albeit at a higher rate. With the currency in trouble – losing at least 230% of its value against the dollar over the last year – they are an easy target.

The incident in Sabo is one in a pattern of similar attacks by law enforcement agencies on currency exchange operators in major cities across the country. In Abuja, they shot into the air endlessly as people scampered to safety. In Owerri, arrested operators were rounded up and assembled in the middle of the market.

The country’s national security adviser, Nuhu Ribadu, who gave the directive for these coordinated attacks, says it’s necessary to safeguard the foreign exchange market and combat speculative activities. He blames the groups for the failure of monetary policy measures taken by the Central Bank to halt the rapid depreciation of the naira.

The state has also blocked access to cryptocurrency platforms.

Razaq Fatai, the research and advisory lead at Lagos-based consulting firm Vestance, said: “The government has been trying so many policy options lately and nothing seems to be working ... People are protesting the cost of living so I think they are under pressure and acting wrongly out of desperation.” ■

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**The Continent**



Photo: Gregory Onyango

## The daunting reality of 'clean fuel'

*Counting on African farmers to grow biofuel crops, Italian oil giant Eni is making big promises to help the air and shipping industries get carbon neutral. In a year-long investigation, **Pierra Nyaruai** and the NGO Transport & Environment spent time with some of the Kenyan farmers recruited to the mission – but who have been left dispirited.*

**W**hen Benjamin Mbelenzi decided to try castor beans, he – to his regret, now – encouraged as many as 200 other farmers to follow his lead.

At his mango and citrus farm in Wote town in Makueni County, Mbelenzi walks up to a castor bean tree. Twice his height, its seeds are well above his head and hard to pick. The trees also took a year to go from planting to maturity, as opposed to the six months the farmers were told. And even then, they “did not do well at

all,” he says. Mbelenzi says he harvested two kilograms of seeds, which would have cost more to sell than the \$0.40 they were worth. Disillusioned, he spent \$35 to uproot the trees.

Contracts obtained from farmers show that they were offered 25 Kenyan shillings per kilogramme of shelled castor beans in 2022, or \$0.25 at the exchange rate then. That grew to 35 shillings in 2023. Most of the farmers interviewed say these prices are just not economically viable.

Mbelenzi's struggle and eventual defeat should concern the world well beyond Wote. Transport is responsible for a quarter of all global carbon emissions, driving the climate crisis. Things like planes and boats can't yet go electric. Those industries are betting on biofuels to power them and go carbon neutral. But the ingredients for biofuels must be grown, often by people like Mbelenzi.

Biofuels are made up of seed, nut, and vegetable oils. They can be grown in arid and semi-arid areas. These become the basis of fuel blends that can emit 60% to 90% less carbon dioxide than fossil fuels, depending on the raw materials used.

Italian energy giant Eni aims to produce a quarter of its biofuel from agricultural sources by 2026, the bulk of which will come from Africa, where it has signed supply agreements with six countries. Work is under way in Kenya, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique, Angola and Rwanda.

The company has begun building a

network of agri-hubs across Africa to process vegetable oil from non-edible crops including the three "Cs" – castor, croton, and cotton – as well as used cooking oil from restaurants and hotels. Eni says that these crops, or feedstocks, are resistant to drought and suitable for planting on degraded soils and so will not compete with food crops: a serious downside of other programmes is that they have seen food crops replaced with biofuel stock.

All this should mean local, small-scale farmers can grow an extra cash crop on land they would otherwise not be using.

### **A promising theory for change**

In July 2021, Eni signed an agreement with Kenyan authorities and research institutions. It wanted to have 25,000 farmers producing 30,000 tonnes of feedstocks each year by 2023. That would increase to 200,000 tonnes by 2026. The company used social media campaigns as well as traditional structures, such as



**Farmers say the biofuel crop has proved a dud and left some out of pocket.** Photo: Gregory Onyango

cooperatives, to recruit farmers. Eni says it got 80,000 farmers with 50,000 hectares of land “engaged” in the project by the end of 2023.

Its next step was to build an oilseed collection and processing plant on public land leased to it in Wote. Wote is a nook nestled between a series of hills. Even though it is a semi-arid area, the town produces a variety of cereals that are consumed across Kenya and its red soils nurture juicy oranges, and even juicier mangoes. A second agri-hub recently became operational in Kwale County, near Mombasa. Two more are planned.

Through contractors like Servizi Agricoli Forestali Africa (Safa), Eni gives farmers seeds, having tested them in the horticultural town of Naivasha, over two hundred kilometres away from Wote.

On an expansive piece of land, Safa grows different castor bean varieties and then distributes them to contracted farmers in at least 10 counties of Kenya. As an aggregator, Safa also collects the yield.

That yield is added to the yield from other aggregators and sent to the agri-hub in Wote. It’s then processed, sent to Mombasa port, and shipped to Eni’s biorefinery in Sicily for conversion into biofuel.

Eni shipped the first batch of processed oil in October of 2022. In May 2023, Kenya Airways became the first African airline to fly using Eni’s “sustainable aviation fuel”. Ryanair, one of the world’s biggest airlines, also signed a deal to buy from Eni.

### **Little proof in the pudding**

Fruit farmer Mbelenzi’s dispiriting

experience with growing castor beans is not the only one. In Nakuru, which Eni lists among its top five counties for castor production, the farmers who are willing to speak are just as disgruntled.

Contracts obtained from farmers show that Safa guaranteed farmers input and technical support, in return for exclusive rights to buy the produce.

One farmer says she was given a quarter of a kilogramme of seeds, half a day of training – with no practical demonstration – and left to farm. Her five castor bean trees netted \$2 after two years of growing. In that time, two seasons of edible beans brought in \$495.

Safa says the money farmers get doesn’t include the extra value they get from land preparation, the planting of seeds and other extension services.

Farmers in Makeni County and Kwale County say that the poor variety of seeds, prolonged dry spells and low buying prices are brewing into one big flop.

The poor yield and low prices are especially frustrating because the work can be tedious. Harvested castor beans need to be spread out in the sun for days on end until they pop out of their shells. They are fragile so farmers cannot use force to pop them out like they would with other beans. They are also light, so it takes a lot to fill up a single kilogramme.

The pitch from Eni and its partners is that the biofuel trees can grow alongside other crops, giving farmers extra income. But farmers say the castor bean plants grow tall and block off the sunlight to other plants.

Between 2020 and 2023, Kenya also

suffered its worst drought in 40 years, made far worse by the fossil-fuel driven climate crisis. The crops are supposed to be particularly good when it comes to growing in these kinds of conditions – another theory undone by harsh reality. Benjamin Muendo from the Kitise Rural Development Cooperative, where 1,095 farmers were recruited, says the drought reduced their collective yield with some farmers dropping out of the programme entirely.

The cooperative suggested introducing irrigation as a solution but Safa says water is limited and not of irrigation quality, adding that: “If there are conditions to irrigate land, it should be for food crops.

When asked about yield concerns, Eni says its research station and pilot trials mean it is constantly improving on the seeds and the way crops can be grown. It also says its grievance mechanism, which allows for anonymous complaints, has had “no complaints”.

But on the ground, there are many concerning signs.

Joseph Nzaku, director of the Makueni Fruit Processors Cooperative in Wote says his collective enrolled 80 farmers to the biofuel project but they have faced “many challenges”.

Mary Nduku, who began planting castor beans in 2022, says she was promised pesticides to help her deal with termites, but they were not delivered.

Overall production volumes are difficult to verify as both Eni and Safa have declined to provide figures in response to questions. However, even a partial picture obtained from fieldwork in one of the



**Fuel's gold: The Rome headquarters of Italian energy giant Eni.** Photo: Giulio Napolitano/Bloomberg via Getty Images

main producing local counties suggests the initial output has been very low. In Makueni, Kitise cooperative said it only got 10 tonnes from over 1,000 farmers it enrolled in the 2022 season.

That's less than 10kg per farmer.

Another indicator is that Eni shipped less than a quarter of its initial 30,000 tonne target for 2023, according to customs data analysed by Transport & Environment, a collective of NGOs promoting sustainable transport, which *The Continent* collaborated with on this investigation. Eni denies this and says that number refers to the “installed capacity” of its biohubs – not the amount of biofuels produced.

Despite these problems, Eni plans to grow the project, both in Kenya and elsewhere. It plans to secure a \$210 million loan to boost activities in Kenya, including building four more agri-hubs. ■

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*In next week's investigation, The Continent and Transport & Environment look at how the project is also struggling in the Republic of Congo.*

## TRAVEL

# On the streets of Kampala

Geoffrey Ndhogezi

**T**he streets of Kampala are best zipped through on a bodaboda. Whether you are Ugandan or a tourist, knowing bodaboda-speak will make that experience more fluid. The bodaboda industry uses a quirkier and more... *efficient* version of Luganda. Here is a quick introduction.

## Currency: Akagolo to Amaja

**Akagolo:** Very little money. In Luganda, akagolo is a powder used to relieve nasal congestion. If you can, pay with more than akagolo.

**Amaja:** Lots of money.

**Ntemera:** Luganda for: chop up my share. “But how much should one chop up,” you ask. What is the right balance between akagolo and amaja? Keep reading.

**Kido:** 500 shillings (\$0.13). The very definition of akagolo.

**Lwasa:** 1,000 shillings. Derived from ekyasa, the Luganda word for a thousand years. Still within the definition of akagolo.

**Kabili:** 2,000 shillings. This should be the absolute minimum fare for any distance, to be honest.

**Effite:** 5,000 shillings. You are the passenger to run into in this economy!

**Way:** 10,000 shillings. Now you’re starting to vye for VIP status at your local boda stage.



**You're kidding me: Kido is the definition of akagolo.** Photo: Badru Katumba/AFP

**Kinyaanya:** 20,000 shillings. Derived from nyaanya, the Luganda word for tomato. See that reddish-pink bank note? Wanna part with it? You are the VIP of VIPs!

**Ezikke:** Ezikke is the Luganda word for baboon. The 50,000 shillings banknote features the image of a baboon. Pay ezikke and your bodaboda chauffeur will treat you like royalty. If you like, they will stick around all day as you run between errands.

## Occupational hazards: Obusajja to Nalufenya

**Ekiddo:** Traffic police sweeps or crackdowns.

**Obusajja:** Luganda for “little men” – this refers to all police officers on the street.

**Nalufenya:** The police vans into which one might be bundled upon arrest. The original Nalufenya is a notorious police torture house located to the east of the capital.

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*Geoffrey Ndhogezi is a bodaboda driver, researcher and writer.*



PHOTO ESSAY

# Documenting the streetwise life of Kampala's people

Words and photos: Katumba Badru



I am a street lover, and photo-journalist and that's my God-given responsibility in Kampala. I have powers to observe, and report on whatever is happening in this beautiful city. While working, I get to feel and see amazing things. I see people in love, I see humanity at its best.

I capture these everyday moments and share them without giving people clues on what's happening with the hope that they can have the opportunity to feel the way I felt or even more.

Kampala is a city of beauty, romanticised style, and those winning whom I refer to as streetwise. It's a blend of poverty, black middle class and colonisers who we call bosses. They

decide who becomes rich, who goes to prison and who gets employed in the bigger office.

People here trade anything, trying their luck and connecting all night long – I guess that explains the no-sleep night life. It's not all good or bad in this city but I love it and I only pray that maybe one day I can see it change.

It feels like a fantasy but all this beauty is painted all over on the street and these moments are not things you will see on your TV screens or your favourite daily newspaper.

I don't make images I wouldn't want made about me. This keeps me in shape to respect people's privacy and dignity even in the worst case scenario.









# How much do you trust the police?

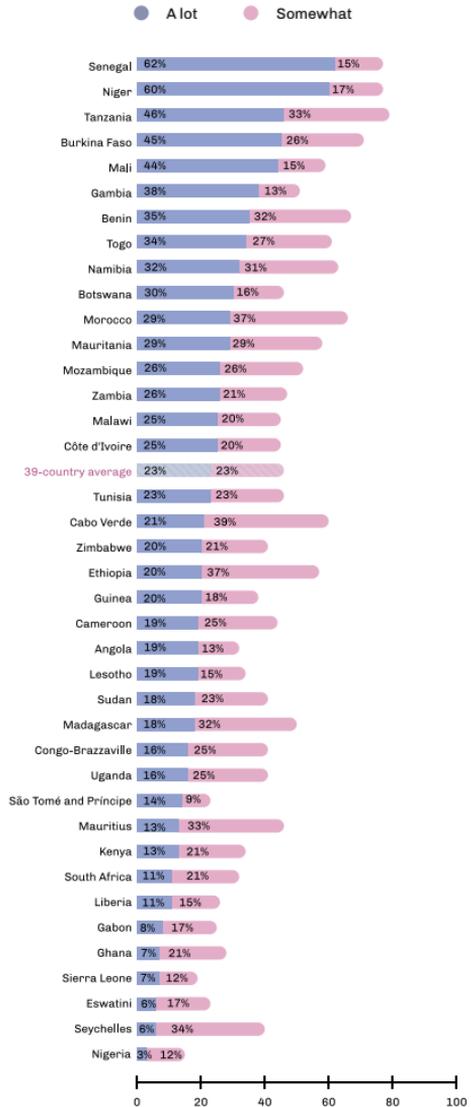
If you trust the police, you'll probably work with them, right? Call them if you have a tip, welcome their protective presence, teach your kids to respect them? And if you don't trust them?

If low public trust is a problem for police work, many African police forces have a problem. According to 53,444 interviews in 39 countries, fewer than half (46%) of African adults say they trust the police "a lot" (23%) or even "somewhat" (23%).

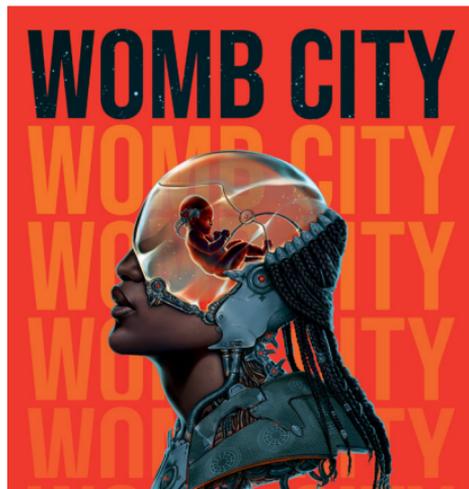
Only two countries on the continent record majorities who trust the police "a lot": Senegal (62%) and Niger (60%). In contrast, an amazing 3% of Nigerians – that's one out of 33 adults – express solid trust in their police, and police in other African powerhouses fare only slightly better, including Ghana (7%), South Africa (11%), and Kenya (13%).

Trust in the police ("somewhat" or "a lot") is considerably higher in North and West Africa (51% and 50%, respectively) than in other regions (37%-43%). And trust increases with age (from 44% of youth to 53% of elders) and with economic status (44% of the poorest versus 50% of the wealthy). ■

Trust in the police | 39 African countries | 2021/2023



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.



## Body shocks in a new breed of Afrofuturism

**A cracking way to start 2024 in African fiction comes with intriguing concepts and gore.**

**Jacqueline Nyathi**

If you're a fan of African science fiction and fantasy, you won't be a stranger to Tlotlo Tsamaase's short fiction. *Womb City* is Tsamaase's debut novel, a work of Afrosurrealist/Afrofuturist horror, set in a future Botswana where women are controlled by the state through microchips and sorcery, and where you can extend your lifespan through body-hopping (that's as wonderful as it sounds).

Readers experience this future through the life of Nelah, an architect in a troubled marriage with an assistant commissioner of police. The couple's been struggling with fertility issues; Nelah desperately wants a child, and they've run through most of their options. This, along with other stresses in her life, sees Nelah give in to a man who's interested in her, and embarking on an affair. One night, high on all kinds of substances, Nelah and her lover commit a horrific crime that brings everything crashing down.

Woven through the novel are elements of local tradition from around Matsieng, just outside Gaborone. Tsamaase has built a complex mythology and world for the novel, and it takes a while to make sense of it, and perhaps one never quite manages. This is part of the pleasure of the novel.

It is the point of all science fiction to make you listen, and *Womb City* explores deeply feminist themes: women as walking wombs in patriarchal societies; women who "want it all"; and then there's even a really horrendous female patriarchal gatekeeper, Serati, who is possibly my favourite character. Other themes include Black tax, the complexity of family and an exploration of memory.

What makes this novel unforgettable are its horror elements. I didn't think I would survive, but Tsamaase's gift is to make you unable to look away, even from body horror (and there's a tonne in this novel. (Also, the undead.) Additionally, the cover, designed by Colin Verdi and Samira Iravani, is amazing. ■

# THE QUIZ

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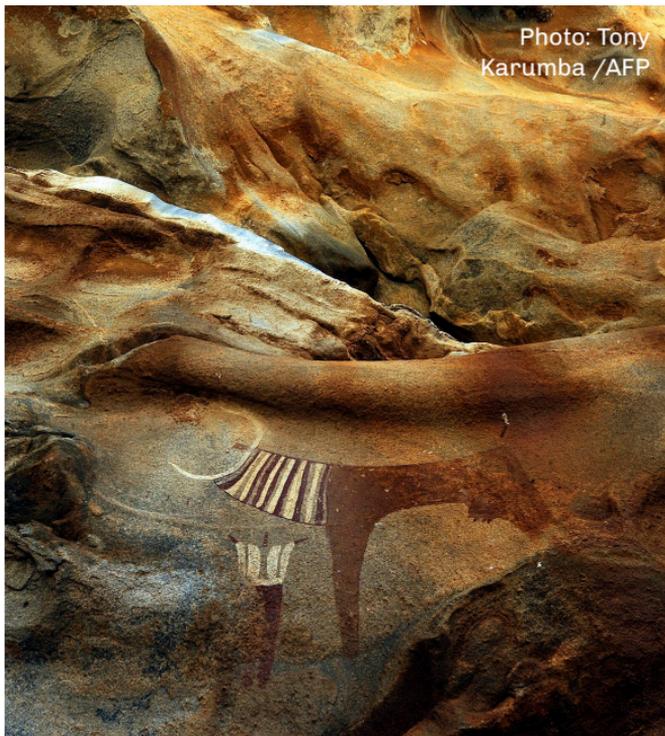
"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

4-7

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

8-10

"When Livingstone drank at Vic Falls, he used a Stanley cup, I presume."



- 1\_ Gaborone is which country's capital?
- 2\_ What is the original name of Victoria Falls?
- 3\_ Is the Congolese Franc used in the DRC or Congo-Brazzaville?
- 4\_ Has Cyril Ramaphosa been president of South Africa since 2017 or 2018?
- 5\_ What is the name of the transcontinental nation on the northeast of Africa and southwest corner of Asia via the Sinai Peninsula?
- 6\_ What is Djibouti's currency?
- 7\_ Where can one see the rock art in Laas Geel (pictured)?
- 8\_ Which country is considered Africa's oldest independent country?
- 9\_ In 1884 the German empire proclaimed a colony which comprises mostly of modern-day Cameroon. What did they call their colony?
- 10\_ Which African country has the highest population of lions?

**HOW DID I DO?** WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

**I**t's been a long week. To be fair, we've been saying that since we came out of the womb. But it's been hot, too, which makes it feel even longer.

We're currently in Nairobi, where the temperature is making us feel like a (well-seasoned) chicken roasting in an oven. President William Ruto has been visiting Kenya this week in between his return from Ethiopia and before he's off to Namibia, and it's always nice when he drops by. He's still silent on the anti-femicide protests that have taken place in the country – not one word about the killing of women, but who are we to judge? Just kidding, we're judging the heck out of him.

But we're told being judgy is an awful trait, so we have decided to try taking the spiritual path and become more zen, which requires indulging in some self-care.

And as we sprawl on the sofa drinking green tea, face mask on and chanting our mantras, we can't help but wonder how our leaders take care of themselves.

After all, many of them have just returned from a gathering at the African Union – surely they must be knackered after all the talking, the schmoozing, the

posing for group photos like Zendaya and Timothée on a Korean press tour.

South Africa's prez, Cyril Ramaphosa, must surely be in need of some me-time after announcing the country will hold its elections on 29 May, with all those pre-election nerves kicking in. Or Malawi's President Lazarus Chakwera, who says the printing of passports has been suspended

due to the system being hacked by “digital mercenaries” who are demanding a ransom.

Amid all the trials and tribulations, what brings them the peace they crave? Is it lighting a tear-gas scented candle? Is it looking in the mirror and saying affirmations like “I change constitutions, constitutions do not change me”?

Do they meditate to the

sounds of disappointment from their populace? Perhaps they practice a bit of yoga, adopting paunchy poses such as “downward-facing dictator”. Or do they simply introduce new taxes and refuse to leave office?

Someone who would almost certainly benefit from a little introspection is Senegal's President Macky Sall. First there was speculation that he would

## Zen out or peace off



### CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Samira Sawlani

run for a third time, coy as ever, Macky finally announced he would not be vying for the presidency again. The elections were scheduled for this weekend, but Macky suddenly got cold feet and announced that they would be delayed until December, with the backing of the National Assembly.

Imagine the state of poor Macky when the Constitutional Council were all, like, “*Non!* You are all cancelled!” and told them they better get their poll on right away. Illustrating the spiritual concept of acceptance, Sall responded saying he would comply with the ruling.

With the election back on track, an amended list of 19 candidates vying for the presidency has now been published, with only one change after Rose Wardini withdrew her candidature. But 15 of these candidates have released a statement questioning the “inexplicable slowness” in setting a new election date, saying that “everything is moving at the pace of President Macky Sall’s ill will.”

Bit unfair. Of course Macky is taking things slow, he’s on a spiritual journey! He’s taking deep, slow breaths and working through all the emotions that come with having to step down.

There are those who say self-care and spirituality is not about candles and face masks but about cutting toxic people out of your life. Perhaps that is an idea that *Keeping Up With The Coupdashian* star, and interim president of Guinea, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, is subscribing to.

This week the secretary-general for the presidency, Amara Kamara, appeared on



**Coup 3.0? Mamady Doumbouya’s self-care involves removing toxic influences like ‘interim governments’.** Photo: John Wessels/AFP

state TV surrounded by soldiers, in what was an image worthy of a *Vogue* front cover. He announced that the interim government had been dissolved and that directors of staff, secretary-generals and their deputies would be in charge until a new government was formed.

What’s more, the junta said outgoing ministers’ bank accounts would be frozen, their bodyguards withdrawn, and that they would be required to surrender their travel documents. With no reason given, we can only speculate that Doumbouya thought they also needed to de-stress. Possibly in a cell somewhere.

Elsewhere, the United States once again vetoed a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. The United Kingdom abstained. In future, when we talk about this genocide, when they hold their one-minute silences, when they want to talk up human rights, we will reflect on this moment, and that in their silence we don’t see tranquillity, but complicity. ■

# Cameroon's opposition hopes for a renaissance

**The repressive regime is forcing opposition parties to put their heads together and get creative.**

**Steve Tametong**

**T**he opposition in Cameroon has had a worrying trajectory since it was legalised in 1990.

Things looked positive at first. Vibrant parties emerged, such as the Social Democratic Front (SDF), led by the charismatic Ni John Fru Ndi. It won more than half of the seats in the National Assembly. While President Paul Biya secured re-election, he only beat Ndi by 4%, and everything changed: understanding how close he was to defeat, Biya clamped down. Repression became more intense, and restrictive measures such as bans on meetings and demonstrations were introduced.

Worse, Biya's efforts to divide and rule the opposition by sponsoring some groups and co-opting others has led to damaging fragmentation. Today there are more than 300 opposition parties; none can compete with Biya's Cameroon People's Democratic Movement.

But Biya is not the only problem. A lack of common vision, underpinned by ethnic divisions, has prevented the emergence of a more coherent challenge to the ruling party's hegemony. The SDF has also

struggled to replace Ndi, and has suffered from the conflict in the English-speaking regions of the country, which has made it difficult to campaign in its stronghold. Taken together, these challenges explain why the opposition only holds 28 out of 180 seats in the National Assembly and has no senators at all. Even the decision of Maurice Kamto to form the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC) in 2012 failed to deliver political change. Despite considerable fanfare, Kamto was controversially only given 14% of the vote in the 2018 presidential election.

Even in the darkest moments, however, there is hope. Having boycotted legislative and municipal elections in 2020, the MRC will take part in the 2025 polls. Opposition parties have also started to draw together to promote a mass voter registration drive and form a coalition around the Alliance for Change. Biya remains in control, but opposition supporters can now dream of a renaissance. ■



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# THE BIG PICTURE

Wave of destruction: A surfer walks next to the rubble of houses demolished by authorities in the coastal town of Imsouane, as part of a plan to destroy unlicensed buildings across the Moroccan shoreline.

Photo: Fadel Senna/AFP



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