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MALO OTI TIMVETSETSANE:
INTERTRIBALISM IN MALAWIAN AFROBEATS AND AMAPIANO

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MALO OTI TIMVETSETSANE:
INTERTRIBALISM IN MALAWIAN AFROBEATS AND AMAPIANO

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
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BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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ABSTRACT

Afrobeats, an umbrella genre widely credited to Nigeria, evolved from a long history of musical exchange across West Africa. Amapiano, an umbrella genre from South Africa, emerged through similar cross-cultural, regional exchange. Both genres now experience global popularity, with artists from many cultures shaping their ongoing evolution. This thesis examines how Malawian musicians adapt Afrobeats and Amapiano to express an intertribal identity. Drawing on ethnographic research and musical analysis grounded in historical context, I argue that language, lyrical themes, musical characteristics, and videography transform these foreign-adopted genres into distinctly Malawian expressions — ones that foster unity at the national, regional, continental, and global levels while negotiating local Malawian identities to create a shared intertribal identity. This thesis contributes to ethnomusicological literature on contemporary Malawian music and expands theoretical notions of intertribalism in Malawian contexts.

Keywords: ‘Malawi’ ‘Afrobeats’ ‘Amapiano’ ‘intertribalism’

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Interlocutor Profiles



Name: Kate

Age: 27

Ethnic Group: Sena

Birthplace: Blantyre, Malawi

Mother tongue(s): Chichewa

Languages spoken: English, Chichewa, and Shona

Current residence: Lilongwe, Malawi

Places lived: Vadodara, Gujarat, India

Education: Bachelor's in Social Work

Occupation: Counselor

Hobbies: listening to music and sermons and reading

Favorite Musical Artist(s): Kari Jobe, Kim Walker, Pompi, and Tems

Favorite Malawian Artist(s): Theresa Phondo, Lawi, Fada Moti, and Kell Kay



Name: Eunice Sherah

Age: 25

Ethnic Group: Tumbuka

Birthplace: Mzimba, Malawi

Mother tongue(s): Chitumbuka

Languages spoken: Chitumbuka, Chichewa, and English

Current residence: Lilongwe, Malawi

Places lived: Mzimba, Kasungu, Lilongwe

Education: High School Diploma, Postgraduate

Occupation: Intern

Hobbies: listening to music, visiting new places, reading books

Favorite Musical Artist(s): Coco Jones

Favorite Malawian Artist(s): Eli Njuchi



Name: MacDonald Msosa

Nickname(s): Dee

Age: 28

Ethnic Group: Chewa

Birthplace: Dwangwa, Nkhohotakota, Malawi

Mother tongue(s): English and Chichewa

Current residence: Lilongwe, Malawi

Places lived: Dwangwa, Lilongwe, Blantyre, Salima, Mzuzu

Education: High School Diploma, BA (Theology)

Occupation: Research Assistant for World Vision NGO

Hobbies: reading, watching shows, news, etc.

Favorite Musical Artist(s): Kim Walker-Smith, Jesus Culture, James Arthur, Dean
Lewis

Favorite Malawian Artist(s): Kelvin Sings and Mazani



Name: Nholvahiwa Cosmas

Age: 25

Ethnic Group: Lomwe

Birthplace: Mulanje, Malawi

Mother tongue(s): Chilhomwe

Languages spoken: English and Chichewa

Current residence: United States of America

Places lived: Malawi and Canada

Education: Bachelor's in History, Master's in History

Hobbies/Interests: African history, Football (Soccer), Reading, Dance

Favorite Musical Artist(s): Santan Dave, Eminem, Sauti Sol, Little Simz, Burna

Boy, and Westlife

Favorite Malawian Artist(s): Lucius Banda, Namadingo, Lawi, The Black

Missionaries, and Vic Marley



Nickname: Mquzama

Age: 28

Ethnic Group: Tumbuka

Birthplace: Mzuzu, Malawi

Mother tongue(s): Chitumbuka

Languages spoken: Chitumbuka, Chichewa, and English

Current residence: United Kingdom

Places lived: India, Scotland, and England

Education: Postgraduate degree

Occupation: Researcher and Blogger

Hobbies/Interests: Music and Football (Soccer)

Favorite Musical Artist(s): Touchline, Pompi, Lecrae, and Dean Lewis

Favorite Malawaian Artist(s): Suffix, Maggie Kudrum, Real Elements, Onesimus



Name: Constance

Nickname: Coco/Connie

Age: 28

Ethnic Group: Tumbuka

Birthplace: Lilongwe, Malawi

Mother tongue(s): Chitumbuka

Languages spoken: Chitumbuka, Chichewa, English, Spanish, some French & German

Current residence: Germany

Places lived: Norway and the United States of America

Education: Currently pursuing a master's degree

Occupation: Student

Hobbies/Interests: Yoga, walks, matcha tea, ping pong, cooking

Favorite Musical Artist(s): Namadingo, Tanerelle, and Olivia Dean

Favorite Malawian Artist(s): Namadingo



Name: Jeremiah

Age: 28

Ethnic Group: Tumbuka and Chewa

Birthplace: Katoto, Mzuzu, Malawi

Mother tongue(s): Chitumbuka

Languages spoken: English, Chichewa, Chitumbuka, and Latin

Current residence: Lilongwe, Malawi

Places lived: United Kingdom

Education: Highschool

Occupation: Businessman

Hobbies/Interests: Vintage movies

Favorite Musical Artist(s): Luther Vandross, Dorothy Danridge, and Majid Jordan

Favorite Malawian Artist(s): Matafale and The Black Missionaries



Name: Fikiswayinkhosi

Nickname: Fiki

Age: 28

Birthplace: Manzini, Kingdom of Eswatini, Swaziland

Mother tongue(s): siSwati

Languages spoken: English and siSwati

Current residence: Mbabane, Eswatini

Education: Sifundzani Primary School, Waterford Kamhlaba UWCSA (High School),
Wartburg College

Occupation: Musician

Hobbies/Interests: Gaming and gym

Favorite Musical (Artists): Michael Jackson, Jordan Rakei, Tems, Kendrick Lamar,
and Juls



Stage name: Mazani

Nicknames: Zani, Chifu, Prince of Hearts

Age: 26

Ethnic Group: Chewa

Birthplace: Blantyre, Malawi

Mother tongue(s): Chichewa

Languages spoken: Chichewa and English

Current residence: Blantyre

Education: Advanced Diploma in Business Information Technology

Occupation: Musician/Performing Artist

Hobbies/Interests: Gaming, watching football, reading, working out

Favorite Musical Artist(s): Daniel Caesar, Fireboy DML

Favorite Malawian Artist(s): Maskal

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

What does intertribalism sound like in Malawi?

That was not a question I set out to answer when I went to Malawi, yet the longer I stayed the more it perplexed me. I arrived with no expectations but left with more questions than answers.

Although one could argue that life itself is transient, this short period of my life was particularly so. After graduating with my bachelor's degree in 2021, I decided I had enough money saved to fulfill my lifelong dream of living abroad. So, I had a goodbye party with my friend group and given that we are a blend of internationals and locals, the background music went around the world and back. After bittersweet "until next times" I left for Thailand where I lived, worked, and traveled for a year and four months.

I had made the difficult decision to not renew my contract teaching English as a second language (ESL) at a Japanese international kindergarten in Bangkok, Thailand, packed up everything in my high-rise apartment, and went to the Philippines for two weeks before returning to Bangkok to celebrate Songkran (the Thai New Year's celebration involving nation-wide water fights), and finally, headed back to Oklahoma, where I readjusted to the time difference only to launch into a new one two weeks later.

Connie, my best friend I met through our student job in the States, called me while I was in the Philippines to let me know that she was going back to Lilongwe, Malawi to fulfill her dream of building her own house on some land she bought, and she asked if I wanted to go with her. Incredibly flattered and with no real plans other than to get a job back in the U.S. to make more money to travel, I checked my bank account and

committed. We coordinated the same 36-hour flights from Dallas, Texas to Lilongwe, Malawi (with an overnight in Abu Dhabi, Ethiopia) and set out on a journey that lasted a little over three weeks.

Those three weeks were enveloped by a musical variety I was not anticipating. We listened to Gospel while doing chores at Tamara's and Pilirani's houses in the same compound. Reggae and Jazz when we went to watch soccer or dance at Four Seasons in Lilongwe. Soundcloud rap from my friend Nedson's "rap phase" and Arthur's current pursuits. We watched from our seats at an Indian restaurant in Mzuzu a man dressed head to toe in animal skins performatively dancing Ingoma followed by a slow trailing car that blasted music. A group of children and adults, men and women, who were singing acapella in harmony going around a boat on Lake Malawi. A one-man-band busked outside a Shoprite playing guitar, a kick drum, the harmonica, and singing. Most of all, everywhere we went we heard Afrobeats and Amapiano.

Fast-forward to a month after my return to the States from Malawi, and the first opportunity presented to me was a reintroduction to music through the pursuit of a master's degree at the University of Oklahoma. I enrolled in my first semester of courses, including *Music, Sound, and Indigeneity* taught by Dr. Max Yamane. Sometime in that course, Dr. Yamane introduced our class to the concept of intertribalism. Through many conversations of sharing my Malawian experiences with Dr. Yamane, we both connected the dots of intertribalism in Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano.

In this thesis, I argue that Malawians have made Afrobeats and Amapiano *malo oti timvetsetsane*, or "a place for us to gather" through their unique take on the foreign adopted genres. *Malo oti timvetsetsane*, a Chichewa phrase, captures the communal

essence of intertribalism that Malawian musicians have created through these genres as a musical space in which people from various ethnic groups can come together and enjoy music.

Malawi: A Brief Historical and Musical Overview

Historical, Political, and Musical Context

An examination of the contemporary musical ecosystem in Malawi requires a working understanding of the country's complex history, as musical trends are not static events. Cross-cultural influences and exchanges through colonialism, religious and spiritual practices, labor migration, postcolonial governance have deeply shaped the ways in which music has developed in the region of Southern Africa, specifically in Malawi (Tangri 1968; Chirambo 2005; Lwanda 2021). The following is a brief and selective account of how the musical ecosystem of the country has continuously transformed through eras in the form of cross-border mobility, political intervention, and evolving production technologies (Lwanda 2008). This is followed by general information about present-day Malawi as a nation in order to understand the environment that nests the modern genres studied in this research.

Pre-Colonialism and Early Musical Exchange

Prior to the era of Western colonial intervention, the geographic area known today as Malawi (a larger region encompassing large portions of modern-day Mozambique, Zambia, and Malawi referred to as 'Maravi') was characterized by intense cultural exchange (Lwanda 2021; Phiri 1977; Pike 1965). Before European borders were imposed on the region, communities such as the Tumbuka, Yao, Sena, Lomwe, Ngoni, Chewa, and

more each had distinct musical traditions with different purposes (Pike 1965; Phiri 1977, 1988; Strumpf 1999). Some musical practices are spiritual such as the Gule Wamkulu of the Chewa (Boucher 2012) and Vimbuza of the Tumbuka (Friedson 1996), some for initiation into adulthood such as the Chinamwali female initiation of the Chewa (Talakinu 2019; Winterbottom and Lancaster 2019), some for celebrating such as the Tchopa of the Lomwe and Ingoma of the Ngoni, and many of these same musical practices are also done at funerals (Strumpf 1999). Music was and still is a social tool embedded in communities through storytelling and spirituality (Phiri 1983; Unesco 2022).

In the Maravi Confederacy, ethnic groups had distinct identifiers, but musical aspects such as rhythms, instruments, and performance practices were mobile in the region, challenging the colonial narrative that depicts African ethnic groups as fixed Tribes without influences (Phiri 1977; Kubik 1987; Kalinga 1998). Stringed instruments such as the *bangwe* (board zither) migrated through the Southern Malawi (Malamusi 1996; G. T. Nurse 1970). Not all ethnic groups were indigenous to Malawi, such as the Ngoni who came from South Africa in the 19th century with their distinct cultural practices who faced a degree of displacement in the Northern regions where they settled (Kaspin 1997).

Before colonial and postcolonial manipulations (specifically the tampering with and restricting of specific musics by Western colonists and the post-colonial suppression of musical flow and expression by authoritarian President Kamuzu Banda), the cultural exposures and exchanges between ethnic groups through music, trading, and migration in Malawi influenced Tribal identities (more porous than the Western notion of “tribal” tends to suggest) and began an early foundation for intertribalism (Lassiter et. Al 2005),

or the development of new forms of a collective Malawian identity while maintaining distinct identities.

Missionization, Colonialism, and Musical Reconfiguration

The arrival of Scottish and British missionaries in the late nineteenth century was a turning point in Malawian history (Tangri 1968; Kalinga 1996). The Berlin Conference of 1884 was an international meeting between 14 European countries for the purpose of dividing African trade and colonization. National borders were intentionally drawn to divide preexisting Tribes because it is more difficult to remain in power against unified groups (Fitzmaurice 2012). This is why, for example, Malawian Tribes are spread across national borders (e.g. Lomwe in Mozambique, Tumbuka in Zambia, Chewa in Zambia and Mozambique, Yao in Mozambique and Zambia, etc.).

Britain declared Malawi 'Nyasaland' in 1891, which was the beginning of Western cultural influences via colonialism and religious conversion in the nation. Christian missionaries established schools and churches that introduced not only Western ideologies but also musical practices (namely hymns). The communities in which these missions were founded had earlier access to the English language and musical structures. Colonists also contributed to the notion of fixed Tribes and the differential positioning of Malawian ethnic groups through their own classifications and interferences in relation to proximity (Kaspin 1995, 1997).

The introduction of Christianity did not suppress indigenous musical practices but reshaped them. Missionaries cherry-picked aspects of indigenous musics to appropriate into hymns. Christian conformity in music meant that melody-centered and communal

singing was allowed, but several spiritual dances which colonists considered ‘pagan’ were condemned (Chirambo 2005). This period initiated the long-standing presence of Gospel music in Malawi; and though it reminisces this period of colonial infiltration, the agency of Malawians in continuing the genre of Gospel must be considered. Malawians infused their cultures and musical characteristics through negotiation and reinvention to serve local purposes, resulting in the creation of new sounds, not merely a regurgitation of colonial teachings (Lwanda 2008; Lwanda and Chanika 2017; Lwanda 2021).

Labor Migration and Musical Exchanges

Malawian musical identities were further impacted by labor migration that occurred throughout the twentieth century wherein Malawian men traveled to countries including Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa to work in the mines as well as other opportunities. The migration to and from Malawi fueled a circulation of instruments and musical aesthetics throughout the region of Southern Africa. The guitar and banjo were a major addition to Malawian music by way of South Africa who were introduced by colonial missionaries (Schmidt 1994), as well as influences of new genres such as Jazz, Marabi, Mbaqanga and more (Lwanda 2008).

Malawians began participating in secular foreign genres, not through assimilation, but by adapting the musics to fit Malawian social concerns, already existing musical frameworks, and local needs (Lwanda 2008), foreshadowing the eventual engagement with Afrobeats and Amapiano. Kubik analyzed this framework and the adaptation of another musical exchange from South Africa, Kwela, which highlighted another instrument, the pennywhistle (Kubik 1979, 1987). New genres that are today considered

‘traditional’ were created through exposure to soldiers in both the World Wars. Both the Beni from the Yao and Malipenga from the Tonga are satirical song and dance performances that mimic the marches and brass-band sonics of British troops. Beni performers even dress in military uniforms (Lwanda 2021).

A political dimension was infused in Malawian musics in the 1950s, articulating the celebration of leaders and grievances (Kalinga 1996; Nurse 1964; Tangri 1968). Reggae, a genre often associated with political dissent, became popular after Ska with artists such as Desmond Dekker and the MBC Band’s *Tili pa mbuyo pa Kamuzu*. Malawians were envisioning a future beyond European colonial rule.

Post-Independence Politics and Musical Control

With the independence of Malawi (formerly Nyasaland) in 1964, President Hastings Kamuzu Banda consolidated power with an authoritarian grip, (Chirambo 2005; Chula 2023) declaring himself as “President for life” in 1971 (Forster 1994; McNeil Jr. 1997). His administration politicized music to a degree unseen by the people of Malawi. Certain genres and themes were censored from the public, and music that expressed dissent through political critique was suppressed and made punishable, thereby creatively suffocating artists (Chirambo 2005; Lwanda and Kanjo 2013; Lwanda 2014). A humorous example of this was brought to my attention by my interlocutor Nholvahiwa: Kamuzu Banda banned the Simon and Garfunkel song *Cecilia* from playing on the radio because the title shares a name with his partner (McNeil Jr. 1997). Alexander Chula's *Goodbye, Dr Banda* (2023) details Kamuzu Banda’s time spent in a dictatorship

disguised as a presidency. The suppression of musical intake and output led to stagnation in the development of numerous genres and subgenres (Chirambo 2005).

Kamuzu Banda famously curated a forced intertribalism (i.e. intertribalism not through agency but from external demand) through the all-female Mbumba troupes which amalgamated various female indigenous musical practices and appropriated them for political propaganda (Gilman 2004; J. Lwanda 2003). The lyrics of pre-existing songs were rewritten in praise of Malawi's President, blending culture and politics while reinforcing gender imbalances (Gilman 2004; Semu 2002). This power dynamic of Kamuzu Banda as the hegemonic power of the nation and its women in particular is seen in the word *mbumba* itself: a Chichewa term that describes a younger sister or niece relationship to a *nkhoswe* or authoritative uncle figure. Banda named himself "Nkhoswe #1" of all women in Malawi and in this way took 'ownership' or responsibility of them yet abused his power (Gilman 2004; Lwanda 2003).

Women in Mbumba troupes were unpaid performers and were treated as free marketing for the President's image, performing at public events and political rallies wearing *chitenjes* (brightly colored and patterned cloth worn mostly by women in Malawi) bearing Kamuzu Banda's face (Semu 2002; Lwanda 2003). First by Western colonization, then by the face of a newly freed nation, the continued appropriation of indigenous musical traditions removed from sacred context was already breached, paving the way for intertribalism through its normalization.

Kamuzu Banda also instigated division between ethnic groups. Being Chewa himself, he platformed Chewa culture and declared Chichewa the sole national language (other than English, the official language) (Forster 1994). However, some linguists argue

that Chichewa (formerly Chinyanja during colonial times, a language of many lake subgroups such as Nyanja and Mang'anja, then renamed Chichewa by Dr. Banda) would have naturally developed into a second national language without his political intervention, and that Banda's Chewa identity is what produced complicated feelings about Chichewa's linguistic dominance (Kishindo 1996; Kayambazinthu 1998).

Regardless of his intention, the choice by Banda to publically platform Chewa culture marginalized the country's many other ethnic communities. Most offensively, Chitumbuka was banned from the only national radio broadcaster which was also the modality many received and circulated musics on, Radio Malawi (Lwanda 2014; Lwanda 2021). This targeting of the Tumbuka likely helped set the standard on the current music industry, seeing as most Malawian songs are in Chichewa (Phiri 1983), even by artists who are not Chewa.

The Mbumba drew more from Chewa cultural practices despite the women being from different ethnic groups, presenting his ideal of feminine and loyal Chewa women (Lwanda 2003; Mtenje 2018). Gule Wamkulu, the Chewa masked dance, was nationally promoted and received state support, politically reinforcing Chewa as the hegemonic ethnic group (Boucher 2012; Lwanda 2021). Banda also reshaped historical narratives to highlight the Chewa, yet again diminishing the importance of non-Chewa ethnic groups (Kalinga 1998). From here, Chewa effectively became the hegemonic ethnic group of the nation. Through the government's restrictions, resistance persisted through underground networks such as the circulation of cassette tapes and some live performances (Lwanda 2014). Artists also censored themselves through indirect lyricism, (Lwanda 2021) a subtle defiance in this time of artistic oppression and restructuring of power.

Democratization, Media Expansion, and Genre Diversification

The first democratic election in Malawi (1994) was voted by a referendum, approving a multiparty system in 1993 and agreed to by Kamuzu Banda, ultimately resulting in the removal from his position of power and marked a shift from his authoritarian rule to a truly democratic nation that ushered in a new constitution allowing for freedom of artistic expression (Seebode 2012). Unfortunately, the new President, Bakili Muluzi, had noticed the success of the Mbumba troops and continued to exploit these female performers to promote his own image and legitimize his presidency (Gilman 2009a). However, musicians could begin expressing their opinions freely, but even musicians who embraced the opportunity to publicly express political dissent such as the beloved Lucius Banda (who bravely critiqued Kamuzu Banda's disregard of human rights at the end of his rule) were also able to profit from commissioned songs promoting certain politicians (i.e. Yellow by Lucius Banda in support of the UDF party) (Englund 2002; Lwanda 2021; Mkhutche 2022).¹ Politicians recognized that popular artists were great for advertising and musicians benefitted from the financial incentive. Voting tendencies were still marked by regional division, with Malawians supporting candidates from their ethnic or regional affiliation (Kaspin 1995, 1997).

There are also external forces using Malawian music as a conduit for an agenda such as seen in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which partnered with Malawian musicians to circulate messages about health (Copeland 2022b) and UNESCO's documentation of some but not all indigenous musical traditions (Unesco 2022). Both

¹ This is not to diminish the significantly positive impact Lucius Banda had on the music industry and beyond, only to point out that musicians profited from aligning with political parties.

foreign actors likely have benevolent intentions in their commissioning and harvesting of Malawian music, but their involvement does pose the question of who controls the musical agenda?

Despite the imperfections of this political transition, musical creativity flourished with unrestricted circulation² on the radio and in physical mediums (e.g. cassettes and CDs) and genres such as Hip hop, and Jazz gained prominence (Chirambo 2005; Gilman and Fenn 2006; Seebode 2012). The early 90s initiated Hip hop into the Malawian scene with Boys Lazy, reshaping sonic possibilities in the country. Video cassettes and satellite television were introduced in 1994 and exposure to music from United States and South African TV channels (and then Malawian from 2000 onwards) influenced musical tastes (Lwanda 2014; Seebode 2012). These genres still have relevance in Malawi's current musical climate. Gospel has been steadfast since the colonial era and continues to hold its presence. The impetus of regional radio broadcasting stations in 1999 expanded the circulation of music to include previously left out rural areas, at least for those who could afford radios (Manda 2012; Seebode 2012). Many musicians went to South Africa to record due to their more advanced recording technologies, (Lwanda and Kanjo 2013; Seebode 2012) but technology and production quality has increase exponentially in Malawi to the point where in the present day, a trip to South Africa is no longer necessary to get a good recording (Seebode 2012).

Though these popular genres did not originate in Malawi, Malawians did not merely copy or mimic them but rather adapted them in a way that was relevant to

² Chitumbuka was restored to national broadcasting: a positive move away from cultural suppression (Lwanda 2014, 2021).

Malawian people. For example, youth used Rap to articulate the realities they faced such as unemployment (Lipenga 2021). They also selectively hybridized genres such as Gospel and Hip hop (Seebodee 2012). The adaptation of these popular genres laid the groundwork for the cultural exchange taking place in currently popular genres, Afrobeats and Amapiano, disseminated largely by the internet (Seebodee 2012).

Contemporary Context: Afrobeats, Amapiano, and Historical Continuity

The intersecting of musical genres made popular in parts West Africa and Southern Africa (i.e. Hip hop, Jazz, Reggae, etc.) paved the way for the adoption of Nigerian Afrobeats and South African Amapiano in Malawian contexts. The introduction of these foreign genres to Malawi by way of various technology and media is a modernized occurrence of music mobility and cultural exchange that has taken place since the Maravi period.

The rise of Afrobeats and Amapiano must be understood not as a rupture in the cycle of development, but as a continuation of the pattern of adapting different musical genres to the cultural identity of Malawians (Lwanda 2008). These genres in particular highlight the crossing of a long-standing cross-cultural exchange, the search for a united postcolonial identity, and new developments in technology such as smartphones, social media, and online streaming platforms.

Afrobeats and Amapiano are reshaping the Malawian musical ecosystem through the increased degree of content circulation, unrestricted musical creativity, and more visibility for artists belonging to marginalized groups such as women and the youth. In turn, Malawians are reshaping the musical identities of these genres through

experimenting with language, sound, themes, and imagery in ways authentic to the individual artists and reflective of the country's many interacting cultures. Afrobeats and Amapiano being foreign-adopted genres offer an unclaimed site for intertribalism, building a more unified community through which Malawians search for the expression of individual and national identities.

Present Day Malawi

The small land-locked country in Southeastern Africa known as Malawi is a product of its unique history and hosts a multitude of beautiful cultures. However, while Malawi is nicknamed "The Warm Heart of Africa," an understanding of a nation cannot simply be reduced to that. Recent data on the economy, religions, and demographics aid in a more holistic picture of Malawi.

Economy

The economy of Malawi is one of the smallest and least diversified in the world, with its classification being a "low-income country" according to the World Bank. The GDP of Malawi is approximately US \$14-15 billion and a GDP per capita approximately US \$650-700.

The foundation of Malawi's economy is agriculture which accounts for 22-25% of GDP, over 70% of employment, and more than 80% of export earnings. Tobacco is Malawi's largest export, but is also known to export tea, sugar, coffee, and cotton. Increase in climate instability is having an impact on the agriculture sector given that

higher intensity rainfalls and longer dry spells and more extreme temperatures affect the growth of crops.

Malawi has a small industrial sector, but it contributes between 15-20% of GDP (food processing, tobacco processing, sugar refinement, textiles, cement production) while its service sector contributes over 50% of GDP (banking, telecommunications, retail trade, transportation, tourism, government services) (“Malawi | World Bank Group,” n.d.).

Politics

Malawi’s political structure is based on a multi-party democratic republic since 1994 and has held regular competitive elections and has transitioned through many administrations peacefully. There are more than 20 registered political parties but the most notable are Malawi Congress Party (MCP), Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) (the current governing party with Arthur Peter Mutharika as its leader), United Democratic Front (UDF), United Transformation Movement (UTM), and Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) (*Malawi Electoral Commission – MEC*, n.d.).

Population

There are roughly 21 million people in the country, with 18% of that population living in urban areas and 82% in rural areas. The population density of Malawi is heaviest in the central and southern regions of the country, with the North being less populous. Additionally, the dependency ratio is highest in the Southern region, with the Western and Northern regions having lower dependency ratios (Bureau, n.d.).

Figure 2.
Malawi's Population Characteristics at the District Level: 2022

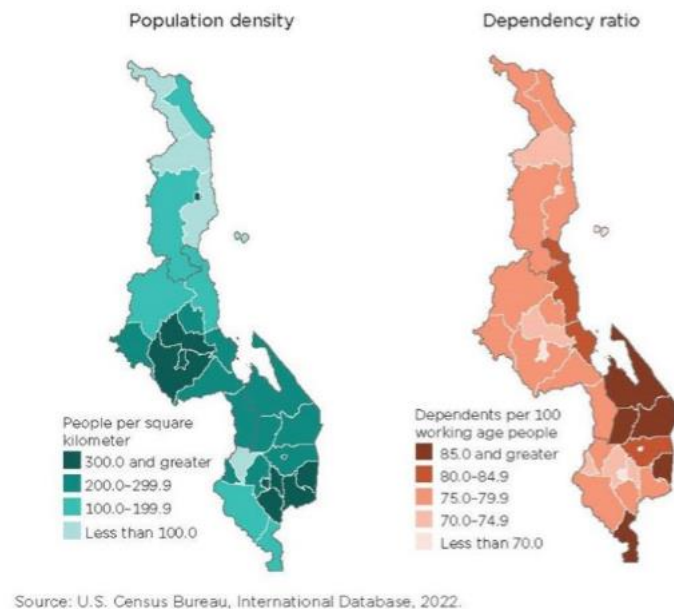


Fig 1: Population density and dependents: sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2022.

Ages

Malawi has a very young population, one of the youngest in the world, with over half of the population being under the age of 25. This trend is an expansive population pyramid, with the broad base and narrow top reflecting high birthrates and population growth as well as lower life expectancies representative of developing nations. The distribution of male vs. female is almost identical with both following similar tendencies (Bureau, n.d.).

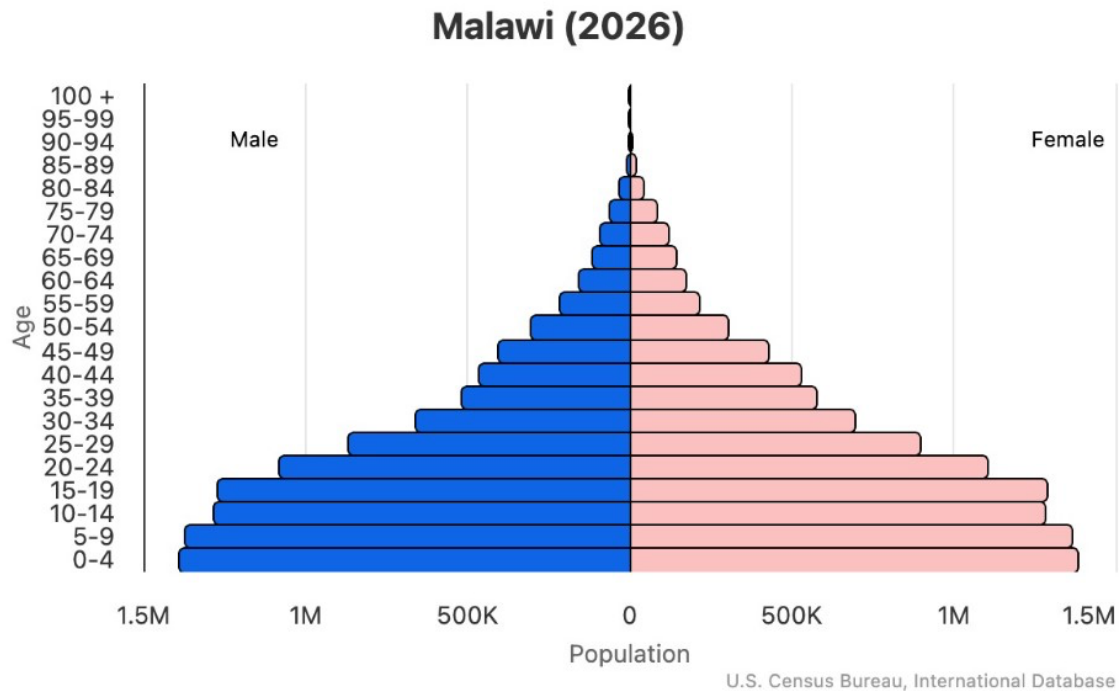


Fig 2: Population: sourced from U.S. Census Bureau 2026.

Religion

Malawi is a religiously and ethnically diverse country. Christianity is the most prominent religion in the country with approximately 77.3% of the population following some form of Christianity (Church of Central Africa Presbyterian: 14.2%, Pentecostal: 7.6%, Anglican: 3%, Roman Catholic: 17.2%, and 26.6% of other Christian denominations). The remaining 22.7% of the population is majority Muslims, coming out to 13.8% following Islam, 5.6% following other religions (Rastafarianism, Hinduism, etc.), 1% being traditionalist, and 2.1% having no religious affiliations (“Malawi,” n.d.).

Religion

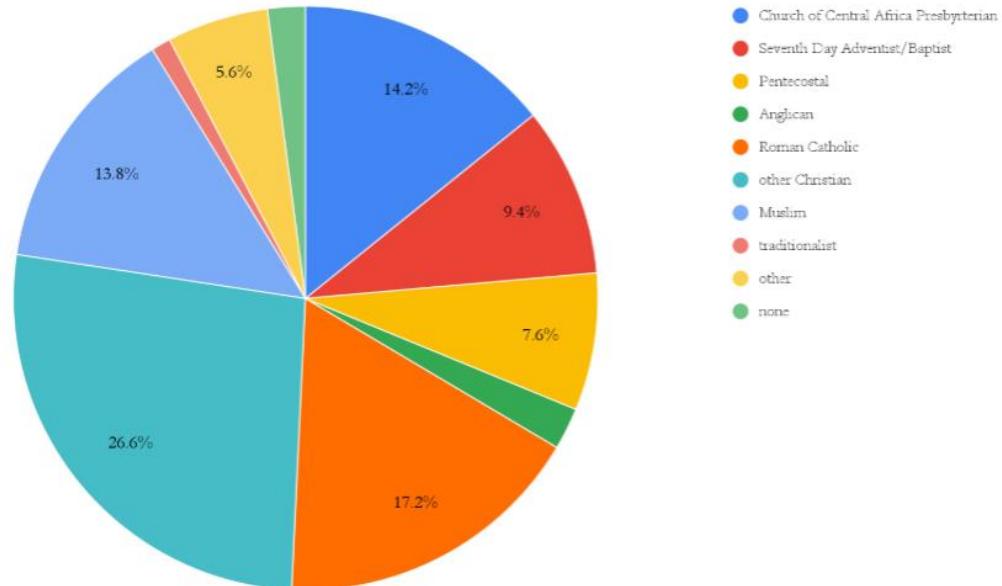


Fig 3: Religions: this graph was made with the data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2023 report.

Tribes/Ethnic Groups³

Regarding ethnicity, the Chewa are the largest group making up 34.3% of the population followed subsequently by the Lomwe (18.8%), Yao (13.2%), Ngoni (10.4%), and Tumbuka (9.2%). Smaller ethnic groups include the Sena (3.8%), Mang'anja (3.2%), and the Tonga, Nyanja, Nkhonde, as well as other smaller groups making up the rest of the population ("National Statistics Office of Malawi," n.d.).

³ I use Tribe and ethnic group interchangeably throughout this thesis for a few reasons. Lwanda uses "ethnic group" in his research and my interlocutors use "Tribe." The term Tribe can have a more negative connotation because of how it is treated in Western cultures. However, it also has stronger identity ties to cultural practices including songs and dances. Ethnic group can be read as more genealogical than as a feeling of group loyalty. Both coexist in the Malawian context, as was reflected in my interviews and survey responses, there is a mixed sense of belonging to a specific Tribe and its customs with a more recent genealogical point of view. Both terms are used by Malawians, so I wanted to account for the duality and complexity of these group identities as they are continually negotiated.

Ethnic Groups

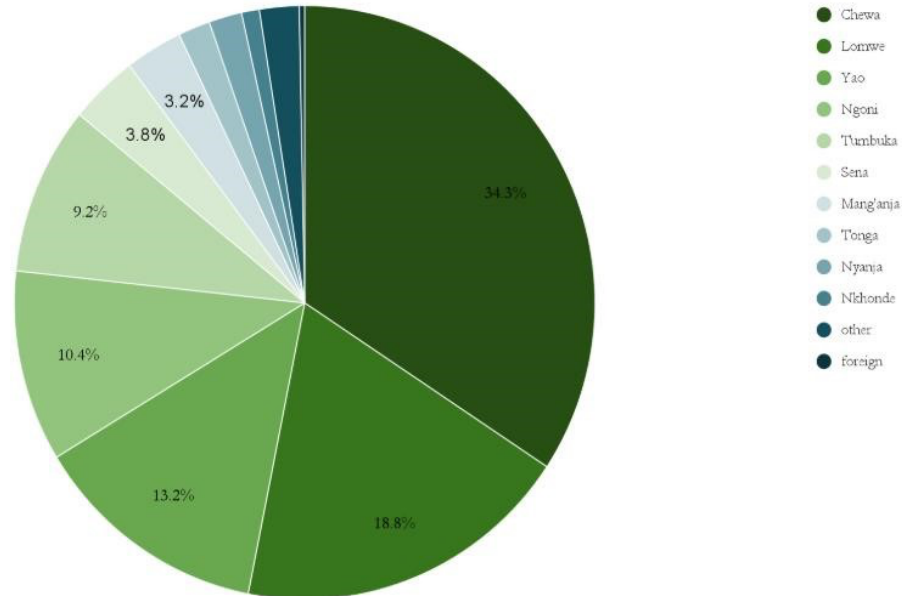


Fig 4: Ethnic groups: sourced from the National Statistics Office of Malawi 2018 report.

Languages

Malawi's official language is English, which is primarily used for education, government and business. Chichewa, however, is the most widely spoken local language and is recognized as the national language. Chitumbuka, Chilomwe, and Chiyao are other common languages. The languages spoken by the Sena, Tonga, Ngoni, Lambya, and Nkhonde ethnic groups make up a smaller portion of languages spoken ("Malawi - World Leaders," n.d.).

Education

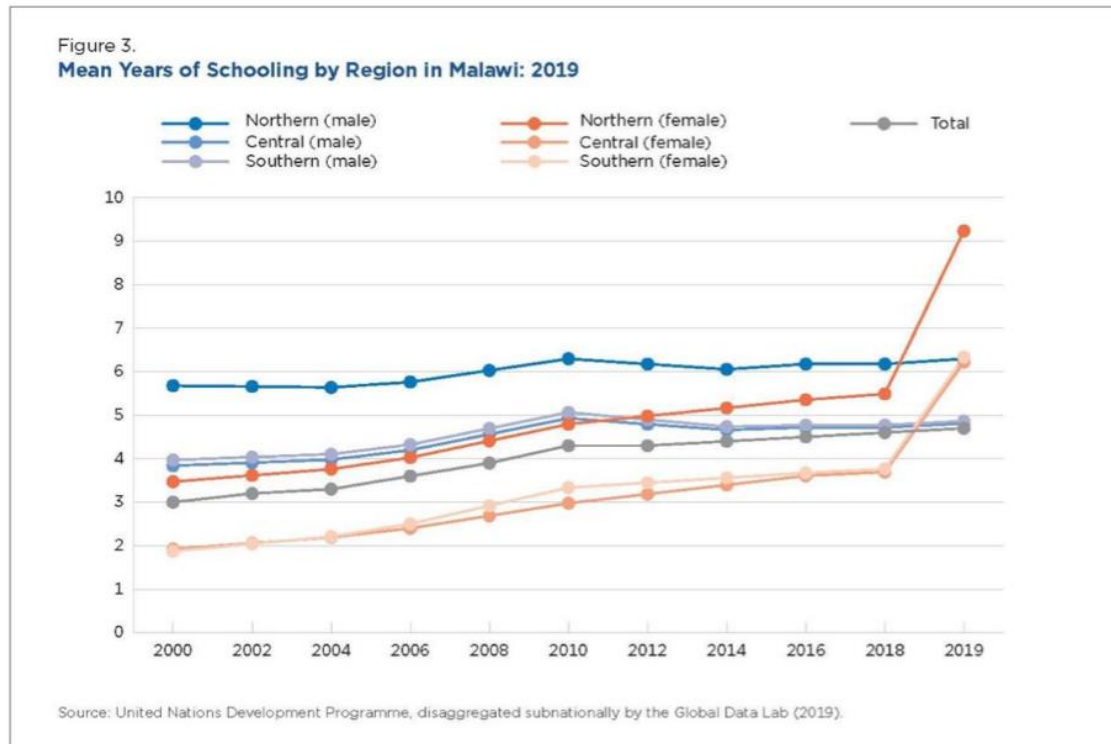


Fig 5: Education: sourced from United Nations Development Programme 2019.

The mean years in schooling among men has maintained the same trend growth with different numerical values. Northern men with 5.6-6.3 years of schooling, Central men between 4-5 years, and Southern men also between 4-5 years over the 19-year period. Men in the North have more years of education on average but as stated, the increases in decreases in the number follow the same general trends across the different regions.

The mean age of schooling among women in the different region differs as well, but like the men, all follow the same general trajectory. Northern females over the 19-year period were between 3.5-9.2 years of schooling on average with a sudden jump in 2018

from 5.5-9.2 in 2019. Females in the central region started in 2000 at 2 years of education with steady growth like Northern women until 2018, when there was a sudden spike from 2.8-6.2 in 2019. Southern females followed an almost identical trajectory to Central women with a slight increase over Central women between 2006-2016, with there only being about a 3-month difference between Central and Southern women, with Southern women peaking in 2010 with that 3-month difference.

The nation's poor economic state and the high dependency ratio contribute to the presence of child labor, with some children working instead of or in addition to attending school (DOL, n.d.).

Access to Technologies, Electricity, and the Internet

The portion with the percentage represents access to communication technologies as indicated per region. There is a significant disparity between the digital access of urban and rural areas, as well as the availability of electricity. From this data, one can infer that access to technology, electricity, and the internet as resources plays a role in who may be represented in the national music industry. Meaning for example, it is more likely for someone from an urban city such as Lilongwe (in which Chichewa is spoken) than for someone from the Nkhata Bay area that speaks Chitonga to be represented in the music scene ("Malawi," n.d.).

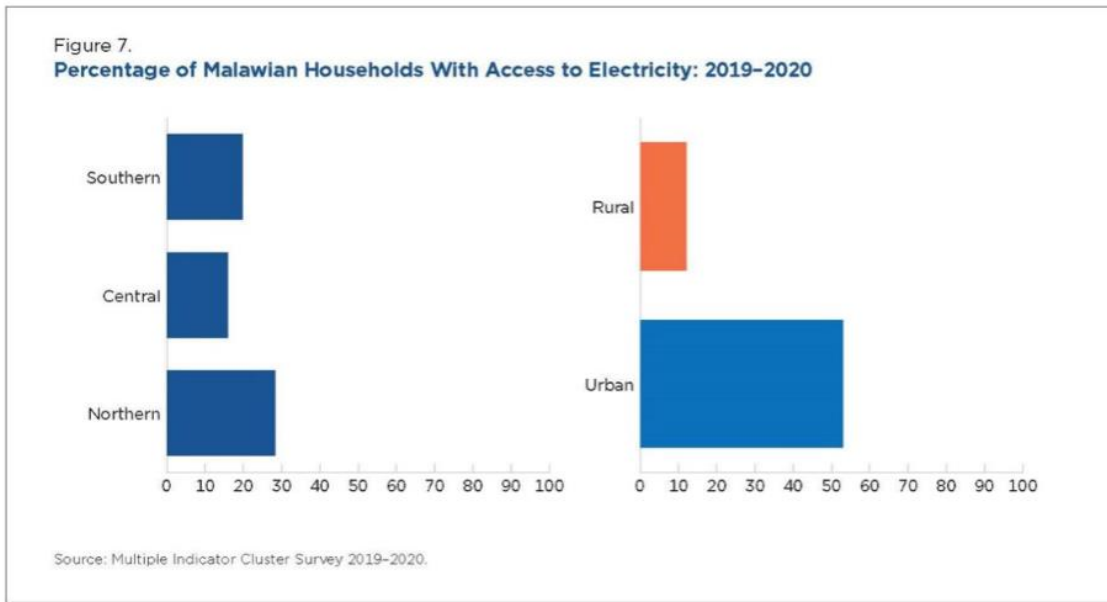


Fig 6: Electricity access: sourced from U.S. Department of State 2022 report.

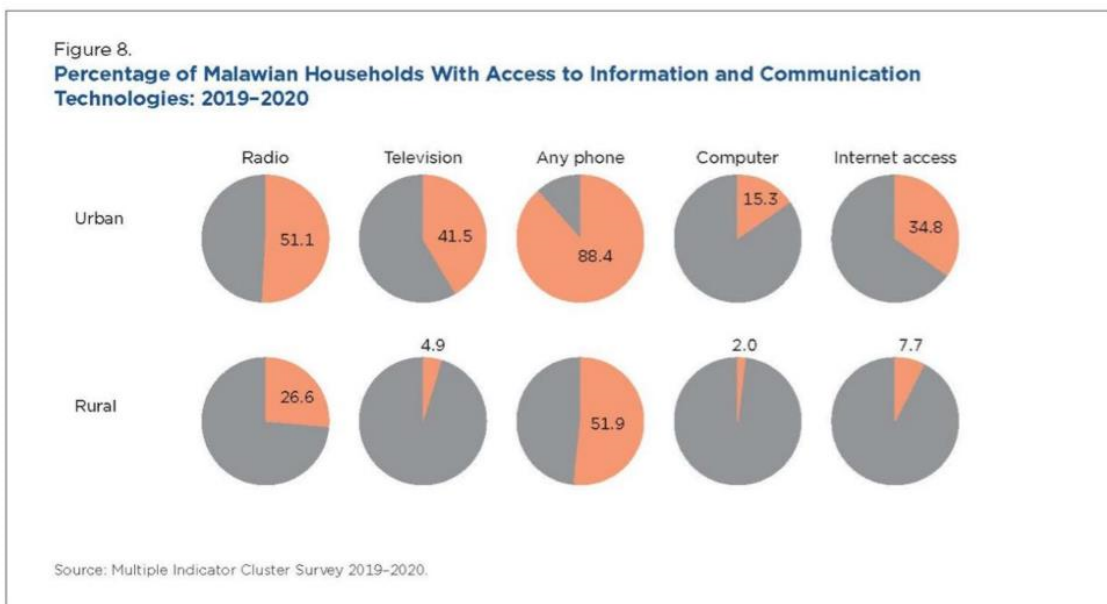


Fig 7: Technology and Internet access: sourced from U.S. Department of State 2022 report.

Literature Review and Need for Study

Much of the research on Malawi as a country is over public health, the economy and agricultural industry, and the effects of climate change. These topics remain essential

focal topics for the country, but there have also been numerous contributions in the political science field, historical research, and a few to the field of ethnomusicology namely through political and historical lenses, or adjacent fields.

Ethnomusicological research was conducted by Hugh Tracey who spent his career from the 1930s-70s recording and codifying across the African continent, including Malawian musical traditions (Copeland 2022a; Lwanda 2021; Tracey 1948, 1955, 1968, 1969, 1973). Others who produced research prioritizing the identification, labeling, and documenting musical traditions in an effort of cultural preservation, often in encyclopedic fashion were George T. Nurse (1964, 1970), George Kubik (1987; Kubik et al. 1968), Moya Aliya Malamusi (1996), and Michael Strumpf (1999).

Claude Boucher wrote about a Gule Wamkulu, a spiritual dance tradition of the Chewa people in which masked dancers embody spirits or portray characters and sometimes even objects such as a motorcycle in *When Animals Sing and Spirits Dance: Gule Wamkulu: the Great Dance of the Chewa People of Malawi* (Boucher 2012). Winterbottom and Lancaster also wrote about a Chewa tradition in their *Society of Malawi Journal* article “The Chewa Female Initiation Ceremony” (Winterbottom and Lancaster 2019). In the same journal, Daniel Mpata wrote about a Yao musical tradition titled “The Malipenga Dance in Nkhata Bay District” (Mpata 2001). Steven M. Friedson detailed his fieldwork experience with the Vimbuza dance of the Tumbuka tradition in his book, *Dancing Prophets: Musical Experience in Tumbuka Healing* (Friedson 1996).

Peter Forster engaged with how traditions are formed in his publication in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* titled “Culture, Nationalism, and the Invention of Tradition in Malawi” (Forster 1994). Discussing the dynamics of Malawian ethnic groups

through political framework, Deborah Kaspin published “The Politics of Ethnicity in Malawi’s Democratic Transition” (Kaspin 1995) in the same journal and “Tribes, Regions, and Nationalism in Democratic Malawi” in the *Nomos* publication (Kaspin 1997). There are writings about specific musicians including *Lucius Banda; The Man, The Music & The Politics by Wonderful Mkhutche* (Mkhutche 2022) details the life of one of Malawi’s most well-known artists who used his music to communicate his political opinions throughout his three-decade long career and Gerhard Kubik’s article about multi-instrumentalist “Donald Kachamba’s Kwela Music” in *The Society of Malawi Journal* (Kubik 1979).

Several scholars engage with feminist studies in relation to musical traditions such as folklorist Lisa Gilman has written extensively on gender, politics, economics, and dance in various journal articles and her book *The Dance of Politics: Gender, Performance, and Democratization in Malawi* (Gilman 2009b). Also contributing to the feminist lens are Linda Semu with “Kamuzu’s Mbumba: Malawi Women’s Embeddedness to Culture in the Face of International Political Pressure and Internal Legal Change” in the *Africa Today* journal (Semu 2002) and John Lwanda in numerous writings such as but not limited to “Mother’s Songs: Male Appropriation of Women’s Music in Malawi and Southern Africa” published in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (Lwanda 2003).

Multi-disciplinary historian, social researcher, physician, publisher, poet, music producer, and editor for *The Society of Malawi Journal*, John Lwanda, has laid many bricks for building research in Malawian music and provided the most extensive contributions to the field in *The Society of Malawi Journal* and his book *Making Music in*

Malawi. Lwanda engages in a meaningful way with the political, sociological, economic, and cultural history of Malawi relating to music. Monumentally, *Making Music in Malawi* (Lwanda 2021) is the most comprehensive look into Malawian music that has been published to-date.

A common theme in Gilman and Lwanda's research is the appropriation of indigenous musics for alternate purposes (i.e. for political propaganda), a topic that has recently been extended to include Hugh Tracey's recording intent and the remixing of Malawian recordings by British musicians in a critique by Ian Copeland titled: *Pop Goes the Postcolony: Britain Remixes Hugh Tracey's Malawi* (Copeland 2022a) and appropriation with humanitarian intent of NGO workers in *Sonic Humanitarianism: Musical Aid in Malawi* (Copeland 2022b). In the latter, Copeland critically reflects on how music has been oftentimes counterproductively used in humanitarian efforts within Malawi and envisions an improved approach he names "humanitarian listening" to produce results that center and benefit Malawians.

Published research covering recent foreign genres in Malawi focuses on Hip hop and includes the feminist study done by Lisa Gilman and John Fenn's "Dance, Gender, and Popular Music in Malawi: The Case of Rap and Ragga" in *Popular Music* (Gilman and Fenn 2006), Jochen Seebode's chapter "Popular Music and Young Male Audiences in Contemporary Malawi" in multi-authored book *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World* (Seebode 2012), and Ken Lipenga Jr.'s book, *Rap Music and the Youth in Malawi: Reppin' the Flames* in which he discusses how rap music in Malawi is a voice for youth resistance and a way of coping and establishing community through "stuckness" (Lipenga 2023).

The listed research is significant, and it is not my intention to discredit or diminish any of the scholars or their works. The aim of my thesis is to add to existing research of Malawian musics by extending the focus to include recent genres: Afrobeats and Amapiano, of which there has been no published research. While I have found one mention of Afrobeats in Lwanda's *Making Music in Malawi*, research on modern musics in Malawi only extends as far as Jazz, Reggae, Rap, and Hip hop. This is likely not due to lack of interest in the topic by scholars, but simply because these genres are newly recognized as globally and locally popular genres and research will always lag behind the rapid pace at which trends change and transform.

Most of the research listed above was not done by scholars of ethnomusicology (Ian Copeland's research is the most recent but does not directly pertain to my research topic), meaning that the ethnomusicological perspective is lacking when it comes to the field of research in modern Malawian musics, and I hope to bring new theoretical frameworks into the conversation on Malawian musics including intertribalism (Ellis et al. 2005; Perea 2013), alliance studies (Diamond 2006), and participatory musicking (Turino 2008). No published research has specifically discussed Malawian music using these theoretical frameworks, and I believe this is a compelling angle for the consideration of future research regarding the transformation and negotiation of identities in music.

Furthermore, the combination of lyrical, musical, videographic analysis has never been done before in Malawian research; and the consolidation of qualitative and quantitative data through survey responses of Gen Z Malawians illuminates perspectives of a sample of Malawian young adults, uniquely contributing to the field.

Ethnomusicology has primarily relied on qualitative methods such as ethnography. The combined methods of ethnography (qualitative) and survey responses (quantitative) help understand Afrobeats and Amapiano from the perspectives of Gen Z Malawians more holistically.

Afrobeats and Amapiano

With how recently popularized Afrobeats and Amapiano are, there is little formal research that engages with the genres in depth. I relied heavily on my in-person fieldwork experience extended virtually through interviews, virtual participant observation via the internet, and original musical analysis to understand these genres and their place in the world.

Researchers have done some research on Afrobeats, most of which is historical context that I used to understand the genre's development from global cultural exchanges through musical mobilities. The most-explored related topic is how Fela Kuti's Afrobeat, the parent genre of Afrobeats, was used for political resistance- a different purpose than the pluralized umbrella genre of Afrobeats has.

From the literature I have read, Amapiano, a genre younger than Afrobeats, has not been academically defined as a genre. No peer-reviewed academic sources center, describe, or engage with the genre beyond a brief anecdotal mention. Heidi Brooks and Njabulo Zwane mention it once in their chapter "Perpetuating Invisibility: Organised Politics and Alternative Spaces in Youth Politics," of the book *Youth In South Africa: (In)Visibility and National Development* (Brooks and Zwane 2021) as an extension of Kwaito, holding a 'long memory' and offering a space for youth visibility. Amapiano

also gets one mention lumped in a list of genres which are used to express the concept of “human-ing” or “doing life together” in Charissa Granger and Francio Guadeloupe’s chapter “Human-Ing Out Loud: Ontologies of Disorder in a Musically Exemplified Trans-Caribbean Option” in *Slavery in the Cultural Imagination: Debates, Silences, and Dissent in the Neerlandophone Space* (Granger and Guadeloupe 2025). It is briefly noted in a French article as part of an evolving musical ecosystem in Senegal (Constantini 2022) but again, it is not central or described in-depth. Both Afrobeats and Amapiano received a mention in “Infrastructures for a Black/African Renaissance: Cultural Institution Building and Organisational Frameworks in Selected Postcolonial Pan-African Festivals” by Gideon Morison and Judith Rottenburg as part of Africa’s rise as a global creative influence (Morison and Rottenburg 2024), and while this greater global context of Pan-Africanism is included in my research, the main focus of my thesis is specifically how intertribalism is expressed in these modern genres in Malawi, to be placed within the context of the continental and global influences these genres have. This topic is important to research because Afrobeats and Amapiano are propelling Malawian music further into international recognition than the other foreign adopted genres and is evidence for the continuous development of a unified intertribal Malawian identity.

Methodology

My research applies diverse methodologies to uncover evidence of identity exchange and negotiation through the examination of intertribalism found in Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano. These methodologies include participant observation, interviewing, surveying, sonic, lyrical, and videographic analysis, the analysis of

YouTube comments and views, and interlocutor profiles. My reason for bridging this array of methodologies is to understand some of the complexities at work in this research.⁴

Participant Observation and Ethnographic Experiences

My brief but impactful journey in Malawi during May-June of 2023 informed the selection of my research topic and equipped me with insight into daily life for young Malawians as well as the current music scene.

This trip was not made with the intention of gaining fieldwork experience, but I am still able to retroactively analyze my ethnographic experiences – experiences that were pure and untainted by research-gathering motivations and deeply immersed in human connections – which perhaps allowed me to share authentic interactions different from ones that may have occurred had it been a research-oriented trip. Music may not have been the objective, but it was impossible not to notice music, and I therefore became a participant-observer everywhere I went. The music I heard, places I went, and people I met profoundly inform my understanding of Malawi and its music.

In addition to my time in Malawi, I have spent a substantial amount of time listening to and engaging with both Afrobeats and Amapiano genres from around 2021 onwards. These genres are significant to my own identity in this way, and my immersion has assisted in my understanding of them.

⁴ I believe there are nuances and interactions between the methodologies I implemented in this study which can be considered in future studies.

Interviews

I conducted over 13 hours of semi-structured interviews between 9 of my friends (interlocutors) through WhatsApp audio calls (made challenging by frequent outages of electricity, unstable internet connections, and time differences). Given that intertribalism in Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano has never been researched, these interviews revealed essential information about the topic from the perspective of young adults (ages 25-29) and admittedly served as a bonus in getting to connect and catch up with my friends. My research aims to prioritize the emic perspectives of my friends.

Surveying

I created and distributed (with the help of my interlocutors) a 22-question survey that received 51 recorded responses, though only the data of 41 respondents was usable,⁵ and even then, not every participant answered each question. Though it is flawed in this way, the data extracted from the response of the participants still offers a valuable insight into what Gen Z⁶ Malawians think about music. Quantitative data is rarely integrated into the field of ethnomusicology, but I made this choice to combine quantitative and qualitative data to illuminate a more holistic interpretation of where, how, and why intertribalism is expressed in Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano. The application of this survey not only centers the perspectives of Malawians, but it also has the valuable

⁵ I am assuming some participants began the survey as a favor and gave up at various points of the survey. Future studies can improve participant retention by having a shorter survey, translating the survey into Chichewa, Chitumbuka, and/or other Malawian languages, and distributing the survey in the field. These were all limitations I had to work around within the scope of this research.

⁶ According to my interlocutors, the same generational identity categorizations are used, with the distinction of those born in 2000 or after colloquially referring to themselves as a “2000s” or “2k,” which would encompass some of Gen Z and all of Gen Alpha. The older generations refer to the younger as *ana amasiku ano* which in Chichewa means “kids of nowadays.”

potential for replication and longitudinal tracking in future research through participants who opted to leave contactable information. Below are graphs of the demographics represented by the participants in my survey.

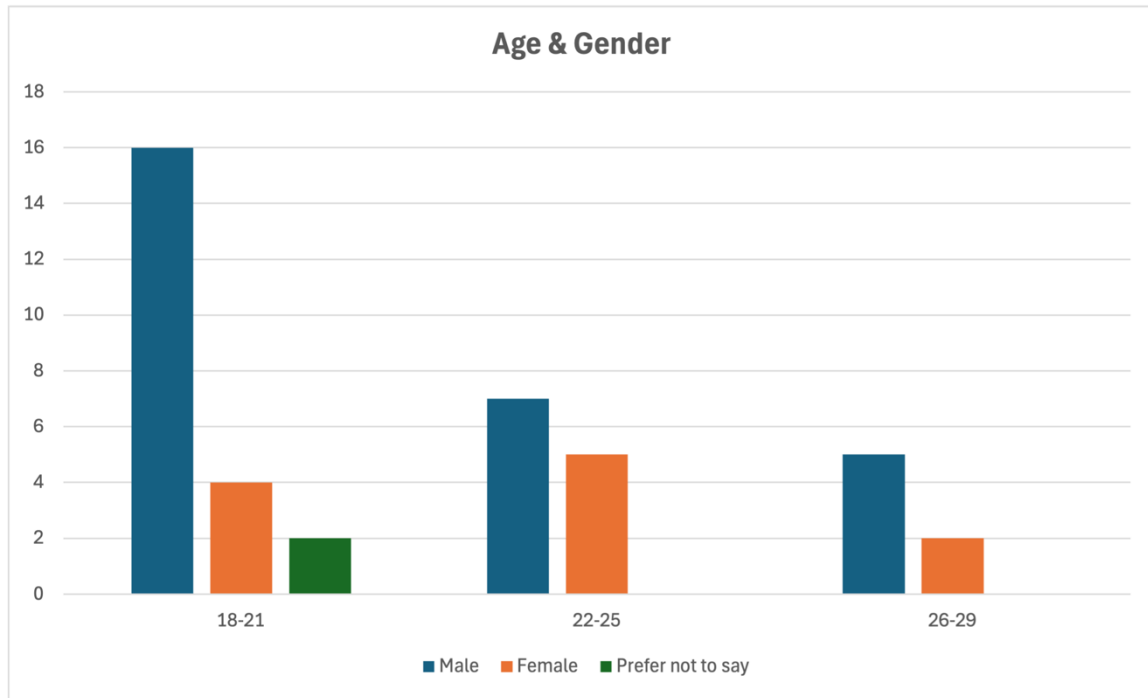


Fig 8: Age and gender of survey participants.

The ages of my participants ranged from 18-29 years old making them part of Gen Z (apart from 29-year-olds born in 1996 instead of 1997). The insight of younger adults is essential because the majority of Malawi's population is young and the population who primarily engages in the genres this thesis discusses are in this age range.

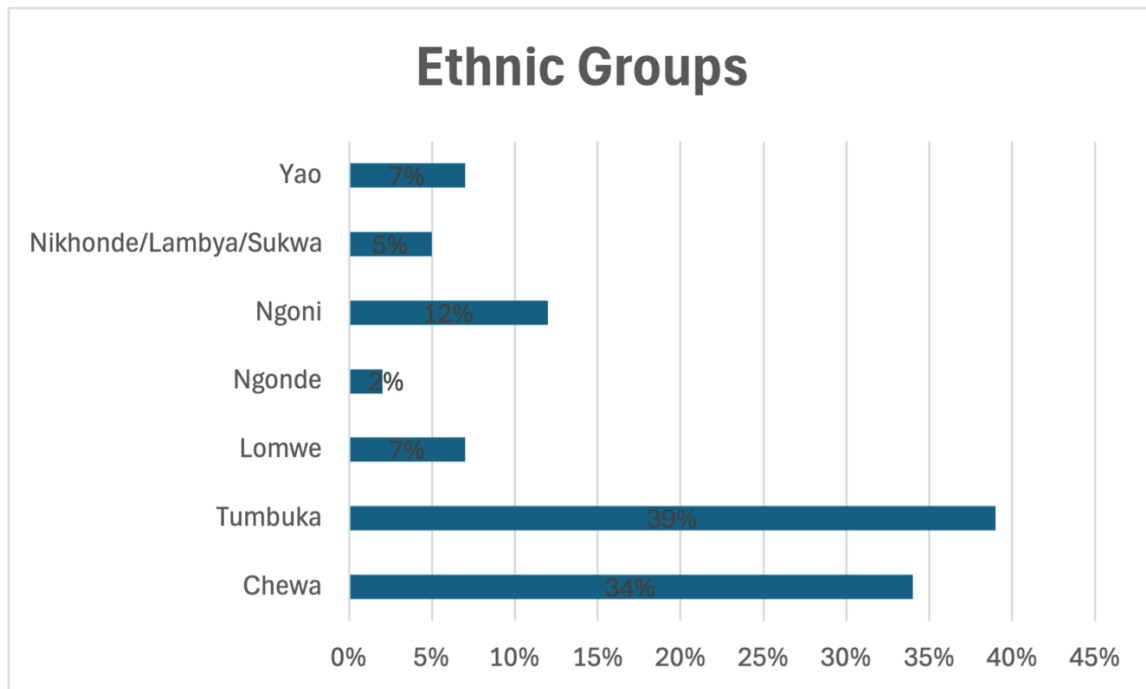


Fig 9: Ethnic groups of survey participants.

The majority of participants belong to two ethnic group: 39% of my participants Tumbuka and 34% Chewa. The Lomwe, Ngoni, Yao, Ngonde, and Nkhonde/Lambya/Sukwa groups were also represented. Some participants selected more than one ethnic group to indicate that they have mixed heritage.

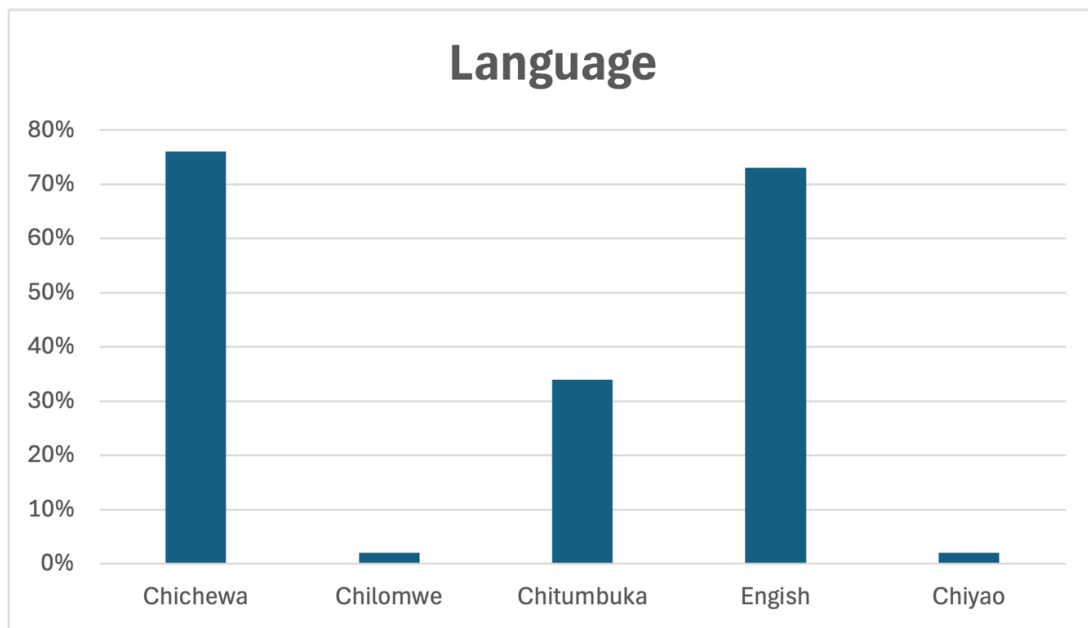


Fig 10: Languages spoken by survey participants.

Chichewa and English were the most spoken languages, followed by Chitumbuka, then Chilomwe and Chiyao. It is interesting to note that the languages of the ethnic groups Ngoni, Ngonde, and Nkhonde/Lambya/Sukwa selected in the ethnic group heritage question were not also selected as languages spoken, indicating displacement of location and/or a linguistic dominance of Chichewa, English, and Chitumbuka. It should also be noted that a few participants did not select English as one of their spoken languages. Since the survey was only in English, this could mean that the participants used an online or in person translating aid, erroneously did not select English, or that their selected answers may not accurately reflect their opinions. For future studies, a survey translated in Chichewa and perhaps other Malawian languages would expand its accessibility to more participants and produce more sound results.

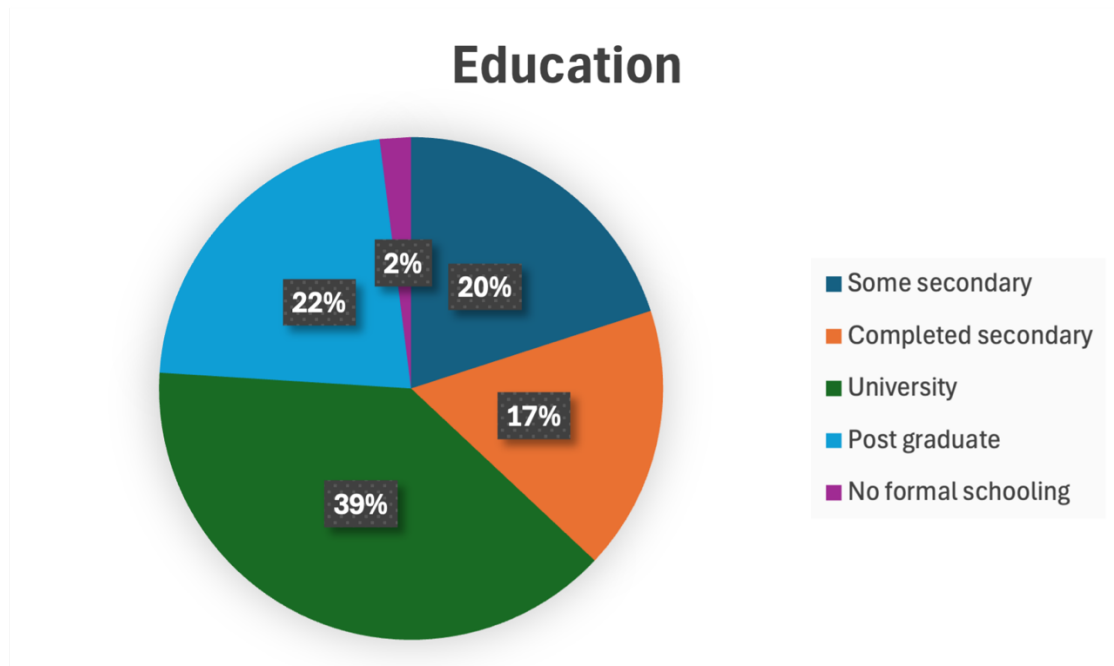


Fig 11: Level of education completed by survey participants.

The majority of my participants (61%) are highly educated, having attended university for a bachelor's degree (39%) and furthered studies (22%).

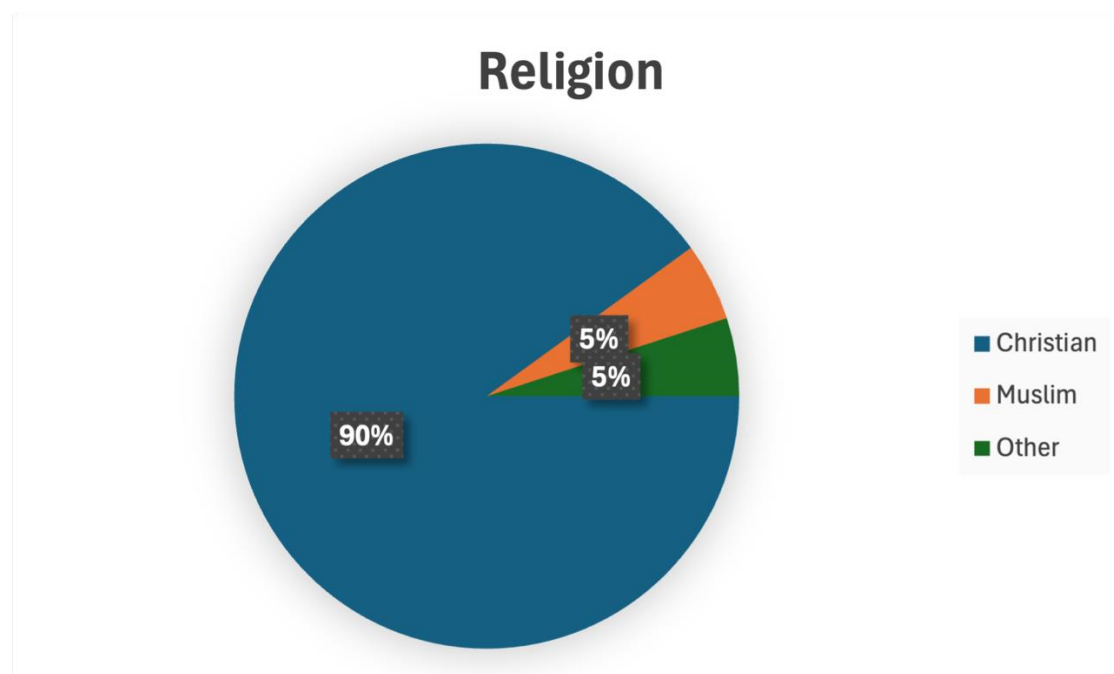


Fig 12: Religion practiced by survey participants.

The prevalence of Christianity in Malawi is reflected in 90% of the participants selecting their religious belief as Christian. 5% were Muslim, and 5% were non-religious or spiritual.

Song analysis (Sonic and Lyrical)

When I first discovered Afrobeats around 2021, and then Amapiano not long after, I was curious to uncover what was so special to me about these genres. I knew they made me feel something different from the genres I grew up with, but I didn't know how or why. Through many years of continued mostly passive and (some) active listening, my ear began to pick out unique features in specific songs or moments of songs. For this thesis specifically, I hope to show some of the sonic distinctions of Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano, as well as help technically define sonic features of the broader genres through my training in music theory.

It would be impossible for any one song to represent the totality of an entire country's music scene. To provide a snapshot into the vast spectrum of creativity, I analyzed two Afrobeats songs and two Amapiano songs, selected based on popularity (in views on YouTube) and characteristics for a contrasting case study: with one of each being more sonically similar to the genre's host country and one of each showcasing the infusion of Malawian flavors. I created charts to show aspects such as tempo, song form, key, time signature, chord progressions, and instrumentation and discuss which sonic components are indicative of a distinct Malawian sound. The musical transcriptions and charts use Western music notation and terminologies (indicative of my positionality as a Western Classical musician) and is therefore limited to an audience with my same

positionality. I tried to be as descriptive as possible, as well as provide time stamps to aid in the accessibility of the information to all readers regardless of background, but the use of Western music theory likely skews the understanding of these genres more towards an academic audience, nonetheless.⁷

The analysis of these four songs as well as others also includes lyrical analysis to explore examples of how common thematic content is approached. It is rare to find English translations of these songs, and I am very grateful to my friends Eunice and Nholva for translating songs from Chichewa to English. Eunice translated every song except Ajuh Guffi's *Chedwa*, which was done by Nholva. They deserve all the credit in making these song lyrics accessible for analysis.

YouTube Analysis (Views, Comments, and Videographic)

There are numerous social media platforms and streaming sites that can be used to examine intertribalism through the reception of Malawian Afrobeats, Amapiano, and Afropiano, but I intentionally selected YouTube because it combines the visual elements of full-length music videos with insight into audience reception through quantifiable views and observable opinions of viewers from across the globe in the comment section. While there are numerous possibilities in conceptualizing “success,” I use a quantifiable measures such as YouTube views (which have significantly increased in recent years) and award recognition in combination with YouTube comment analysis, insight from my interlocutor interviews, and ethnographic experiences to provide an insight into the

⁷ Ideally, a video essay format would help bridge this gap. However, the exploration of drum pattern charts or other visual aids not reliant on Western notation-reading skills could be used in future studies to even the bias and allow these concepts to not alienate audiences outside of Western Classical music academia.

relevance Afrobeats and Amapiano have in Malawi.⁸ I also use YouTube to analyze which intertribal videographic elements are frequently employed in these modern Malawian music videos.

Interlocutor Profiles

I have included profiles of my friends (interlocutors) to humanize them to you, the reader, by providing a bit of background information along with a photograph. This was a decision made in an effort to humanize them to you, the reader, because they are more than interlocutors; they are my real friends who deserve a proper introduction and are the “why” of this project. Additionally, since the weight of my research is in interviews, the portfolios will ideally serve as an aid in keeping track of who said what. This is not commonly done in the field of ethnomusicology, though we rely on these connections to do the work that we do. It is my goal to encourage other researchers in the field to incorporate interlocutor profiles into their publications to start a trend of centering and humanizing our connections to those who make our research possible in a meaningful way.

Theoretical Framework

My research examines intertribalism (Lassiter et al. 2005) to investigate the modes through which Malawian intertribalism is expressed in the adoption and continuous transformation of two globally popular foreign genres – Afrobeats from West

⁸ Further studies could examine other streaming platforms such as Spotify or Apple Music, as well as social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook to expand the angles of success.

Africa (Nigeria) and Amapiano from South Africa – in the current Malawian music scene. I rely on intertribal theory as the main theoretical framework for this research, with several supportive theoretical frameworks.

Intertribalism

Intertribal theory is articulated in the book *Powwow* by Luke Eric Lassiter, Clyde Ellis, and Gary H. Dunham (2005) to describe how the cultures of individual Native American Tribes in the United States are retained and shared in powwow settings; arguing for the promotion of community-specific identities and the creation a communal identity through cross-cultural exchanges. Lassiter et al. concept of intertribalism combats the notion of erasure or loss of Tribe-specific practices through complete “pan-Indianism” (thought by James Howard) and instead accounts for the complexity of Tribal identities (Lassiter et. al 2005). I employ this theory to explore the ways in which Malawians from different ethnic groups express distinct tribal identities yet simultaneously construct a continuously evolving Malawian intertribal identity through sound. Looking at intertribalism in contemporary genres, John-Carlos Perea (Mescalero Apache, Chicano, German, Irish) observed a similar hybridization of Native sonic elements with jazz and rock as I have observed in Malawian sonics fusing with Afrobeats and Amapiano in his book *Intertribal Native American Music in the United States: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Perea 2014).

I must acknowledge the limitations of the theoretical framework of intertribalism in its application to Malawi, Africa because it was conceptualized around Native American identities. While Malawian ethnic groups and Native American Tribes are be a

one-to-one comparison, there are some parallels to be drawn. Powwows are intertribal events in which Native Americans from different Tribes may practice Tribal-specific dances and songs but may still come together with members of other Tribal nations to express a shared intertribal identity. This dynamic is also found in Malawi in the correspondence between distinct ethnic group identities and a shared sense of being “Malawian.” Although Malawi does have organized events for gathering various ethnic groups together such as *Ubuntu* (humanness) which historically modeled and post colonially serves as a way for various ethnic groups to resolve tensions.⁹ There is also the *Madyerero* (eating together) which are gatherings by various ethnic groups on an annual or biannual basis to collectively solve sociopolitical problems.¹⁰ However, my thesis aims to address how modern genres like Afrobeats and Amapiano manifest as a space for intertribalism through their engagement with various ethnic group identities.

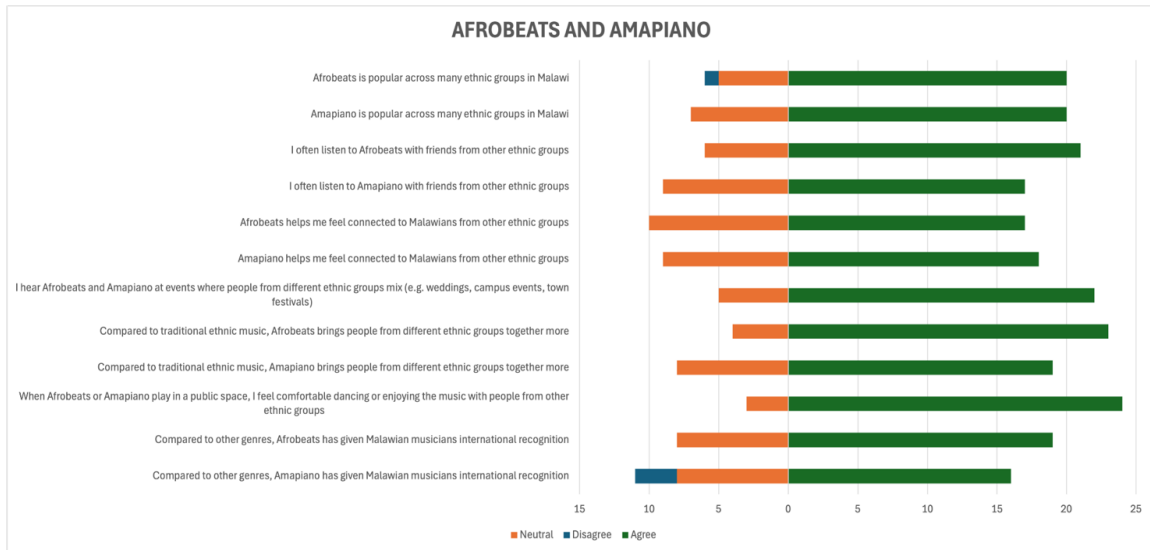


Fig 13: Intertribalism in Afrobeats and Amapiano.

⁹ Bishop Desmond Tutu used an adaptation of this in the post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation process (Musopole 1994; Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998).

¹⁰ The Chewa *Kulamba* and Ngoni *Umthetho* are examples of this.

For intertribal questions specifically pertaining to Afrobeats and Amapiano, more participants answered that they agree with each the statements above, followed by a lesser number who were neutral, and very few disagreed with only two statements, showing that these genres are significant for facilitating intertribalism. There are a few theoretical frameworks from which intertribalism emerge: SSSS music, participatory musicking and “waithood.” I engage with these theoretical frameworks to analyze intertribalism.

SSSS music

Some Malawian indigenous musical traditions fall under what Lwanda labels as the “sacred, serious, spiritual and solemn” (Lwanda 2007, 2021) which he notes have been appropriated by socio-political and popular cultures. They do have entertainment built in through the mode of dance and can often coexist with popular music. He defines popular music as “that music which is freely or publicly accessible to all participants and audiences without transgressing cultural, religious or other taboos which restrict that music to closed and circumscribed participation and audiences” (Lwanda 2007, 2021).

There is a clear distinction between the popular and the sacred, and yet music is fluid, opening the option of proper hybridization born from the agency of Malawian musicians incorporating elements of or taking inspiration from SSSS musics into modern genres. One could argue that this is appropriation, and I remain neutral to this claim. There are aspects of SSSS traditions that are inherently public such as the public presentation of female initiates in Chinamwali or the public Manganje danced after male

circumcision. Some sonic features in these public rituals are copied.¹¹ In discussion, Dr. Lwanda pointed out that musical guardians of some SSSS musical practices object to the “leaking out” of their rituals into a public space. As was seen in the Nation of Islam and rap music in the USA (Shah 2025), Christian and Islamic groups also have objected to what they label the “abuse” of their religions in popular musics and have guidelines to which artists must adhere (Christian Artists Network Association of Malawi 2023; Radio Islam Malawi 2026). Young religious artists have already incorporated secular genres such as Afrobeats and Amapiano with aspects of their religions. My only angle in this thesis is to point out that the incorporation or fusion of indigenous musical practices with Afrobeats and Amapiano is evidence of cross-cultural sharing within the nation and therefore contributes to a sense of intertribalism.

Participatory Musicking

Thomas Turino in *Music As Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (2008) differentiates presentational performances vs. participatory musicking.¹² Presentational performances platform the musician and create a clear line of distinction between the performer and the audience, whereas participatory musicking blurs the lines between performer and audience so everyone is ‘musicking’ or actively participating in the musical experience. Participatory musicking usually reflects egalitarian social values, and this “coming together” is observed in Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano. I apply this

¹¹ Other musical traditions (such as Beni and Malipenga, for example) as well as sonic features which have been well-integrated into the fabric of the Malawian ecosystem (i.e. the guitar) are also infused into Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano but are not considered SSSS.

¹² A theory developed from Turino’s studies of the Mbira in Zimbabwe.

theoretical framework to Afrobeats and Amapiano because while live performances appear presentational, audience participation through clapping, ad-libbing, dancing, and interacting with others makes it a participatory music, as well as interactions on social media. Rather than from explicit instructions, the participatory aspect of these genres emerge from an energetic feeling, or the ‘vibe’ as my friends and I say, produced from the setting in which people feel instinctually compelled to sing or dance along. This is feeling and sounding intertribalism because the public spaces in which these genres are performed are ethnically diverse.

Waithood

This concept is from Ken Lipenga’s *Rap Music and the Youth in Malawi: Reppin’ the Flames* (2023) describes the feeling of “stuckness” youth in Malawi face as a result of being dependents or struggling to build a future in the nation’s poor economy. Lipenga shows how rap is a vehicle for the expression of this “waithood” and I extend this to include Afrobeats and Amapiano as demonstrated in lyrical themes. “Waithood” becomes intertribal because this condition is created by the economic state of the nation, affecting everyone in the country indiscriminate of ethnic group.

Alliance studies

Alliance studies is an inquiry-based model formed by Beverly Diamond in her article “The Music of Modern Indigeneity: From Identity to Alliance Studies” in the *European Meetings in Ethnomusicology* journal that looks at how indigenous communities shape fluid musical identities through the contemporary genres they

participate in and the collaborative relationships fostered (2007). The concept underpins my thesis because I examine the artistic choices that are shaping what a modern Malawi sounds like and how that fosters intertribal relationships. Branching from alliance studies, I apply alliance-building to refer to the ongoing strengthening of cross-border musical relationships between Malawi and its regional neighbors, expanding even further to a global Black and African musical conversation, akin to Pan-Africanism: a movement to unite people of African descent all over the globe, spearheaded by W.E.B. Dubois (Shepperson 1962). Pan-Africanism fueled Fela Kuti's musical mission and informed his decision to change his band's name to Africa 70 (Grass 1986).

While Afrobeats and Amapiano are not explicitly political,¹³ these genres have global mobility, and the engagement with them by various countries with their respective cultures facilitates a network of connectedness in Black and African communities both within and outside of the African continent. This is the wider context of a global musical exchange within which intertribalism is situated, which is why I treat as an extension of alliance-building not to be confused with the Pan-African political movement. There is an international celebration of unique sounds produced from the African continent which has sparked engagement in the genre across oceans, creating a global interconnected community comprised of distinct cultures.

¹³ Marxists would argue that music and politics are intertwined. While the angle of subtle politics in Afrobeats and Amapiano is worth exploring in future studies, this thesis only aims to identify that, unlike genres such as Afrobeat or Hip hop wherein political dissent is forefronted, Afrobeats and Amapiano do not (typically) express political dissent. "Waithood" is one topic which is contextually political, and one can argue that other topics have political undertones, but the expression of political dissent is not the "goal" of these genres.

Theory of Hegemony

The concept of hegemony was formulated by Italian philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, first articulated in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971) explains how the dominant or hegemonic ruling class of elites remain in power through the coercion and consent of the non-dominant class, perpetuating a cycle wherein the non-dominant group consents to the dominion of the elite group and the elite group's status of power relies on the reaffirmation of this consent by the non-dominant group. I engage with this theory briefly to discuss the ways in which Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano musicians are contesting different dominant classes, as well as the use of the Chichewa language in these genres concurrently perpetuates the dominance of the Chewa identity while contesting the homogenization of the colonizer language, English.

Outline of Chapters

Following the introductory chapter, this thesis divides into two almost identically structured sections separated by genre: Chapter 1: Afrobeats Made Malawian and Chapter 2: Amapiano Made Malawian. The format of both chapters follows a brief history of the development of the genres in their respective countries (Afrobeats in West Africa and Amapiano in South Africa) into international recognition, followed by a description of the genre's current characteristic ingredients to form a contextual understanding. The next major sections discuss how these genres from different regions of the African continent have been successfully adopted and integrated into the Malawian musical environment. I then detail the ways in which Afrobeats and Amapiano are intertribal (including lyrical analysis of original translations by my interlocutors Eunice

and Nholvahiwa), contest and affirm different hegemonic classes, and examine evidence for an emerging modern Malawian sound through the hybridization of indigenous sonic and visual elements. Finally, each chapter ends with the analysis of two popular songs that contrast each other because one sonically follows a “template” of the adopted genre with little initially recognizable distinction, and one that sounds distinctly “Malawian.” My interlocutors’ voices are woven throughout, and I find their voices essential in uncovering what Malawians think of the industry takeover of these genres.

This thesis aims to provide as holistic of an understanding as possible of these globalized contemporary genres and identify how they are still becoming intertribal through selective adaptations made by Malawian musicians, accounting for agency and intentionality while prioritizing Malawian perspectives. These musics are mobile, having traveled across their origin borders and entered nations all over the world, including Malawi, where they are again made mobile internally across the nation’s ethnic groups, genders, and generations. Cross-cultural collaborations and social media facilitate external mobility, reaching outwards to a greater musical conversation happening within the continent and beyond, and I believe Malawi’s part in this conversation is worth writing about. Intertribalism in Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano is the manifestation of this interconnected spirit.

CHAPTER 2: AFROBEATS MADE MALAWIAN

It was summer for me, late May of 2023 to be exact, but winter in Malawi, a season marked by less rain as opposed to a drastic drop in temperature. For a country dependent on agriculture, food for the year depends on the rain quantity of the summer, and types of produce grown shifts with the seasons. Connie informed me that I tragically missed out on some of the world's best mangoes, my favorite fruit. Just how seasons change, there are seasons of musical genres, and the genre of that season was a long one: there well before I arrived.

Much to my initial surprise, I recognized many of the songs that were playing in public spaces. From cars, personal speakers, restaurants and coffee shops, clubs and bars, and even Shopwise grocery stores, a genre I heard, a genre I was already familiar with: Afrobeats. The anthem of that Malawian winter was *Rush* by Nigerian Afrobeats artist, Ayra Starr. That song had come out nearly a year ago, and I already knew the lyrics. I was shocked to hear familiar music in an unfamiliar place, and likewise, the local friends I made were shocked that a *mzungu* (foreigner of European descent) arrived already knowing popular Afrobeats songs.

There were songs being played in these public spaces that sounded at the time indistinguishable to my ear except for the fact that I did not know them from my Afrobeats-dominated Spotify playlist. My friends told me they were from Malawian or Zambian artists, and I slowly became acquainted with songs by local artists, most memorably the song *Pefekiti* by Namadingo. This was the beginning of a more intentional shift in my ear to local-specific listening.

Afrobeats is heard in diverse contexts and was a constant presence during my stay. Made central or in the background, it threads human connections. It kept the vibes going as my core group of friends (Connie, Mquzama, MacDonald, and Kate) and Mquzama's cousins sat around his uncle's living room in Mzuzu playing card games. Or when we boiled sweet potatoes and water for *chombe* tea with spoons of sugar for breakfast. It was queued and shared as Connie, Fundo, Gommy, and I climbed orange trees for a snack and threw sticks as high as possible in an attempt to knock ripe avocados from the tree in front of the boy's quarters room Fundo and Gommy shared. It was playing from a phone speaker belonging to some young men we encountered in Mzimba because Connie's little brother wanted to make a late night run for cake ingredients.

Afrobeats is for celebration and comfort. It felt central during the outdoor 'jazz' nights at Four Seasons Connie, Pilirani, Tamara, Jeremiah, and I attended in Lilongwe, where we were gathered around a stage listening to a live band, Malawians singing along to every word. It kept me calm as a driver named Gift miraculously traversed a Honda Fit with Connie, Gommy, and I through a muddy, winding mountain road with more potholes than not on the way to Livingstonia.

Afrobeats does not know class- a steadfast presence in spaces of wealth, poverty, and between. It was in Urban Cafe, a fancy coffee shop in Malawi's wealthy Area 10 with Connie, Jeremiah, and a new Dutch friend, Suzannah. It was playing at an Nkhata Bay beach restaurant where we ate *chambo*, a type of tilapia from Lake Malawi. It was partially covered by the wind from the open windows of a public 8-seater vans that somehow fit 15 people with produce at our feet, to be delivered in the middle of a trip. It

came from the speakers of outdoor family shops and vendors selling *chitenje* fabrics, chargers, sim cards, and other items.

For me, at least in hindsight, Afrobeats is tied to numerous memories from my time in Malawi and my adult life. The examples above are only a handful of moments whereby Afrobeats has aided in fostering a sense of community through creating moments of shared listening, connecting friends and strangers alike from all over the world irrespective of social differences. This communal convergence is the spirit of intertribalism.

Introduction

This chapter argues that Malawian intertribalism is expressed in Afrobeats through the Chichewa language, lyrical themes, videography depicting daily life and cultural practices, location, and sonic qualities. I first provide a brief history of cross-cultural exchange to show how Afrobeats formed into the umbrella genre known today and give evidence of its international relevance. I then detail the characteristics of Afrobeats by discussing its subgenres, defining sonic features, lyrical themes, and videographic components. This transitions into the topic of Afrobeats in Malawi where I talk about how it was adopted and the success that Malawian Afrobeats artists have seen measured by award nominations and recognition as well as views on YouTube. To explore how Malawian Afrobeats facilitates intertribalism I look at language choice, lyrical themes, videographic components, location, and sonic qualities that are uniquely Malawian. I also briefly discuss how Malawian Afrobeats is used for sonic, gender, linguistic, and generational hegemonic contestations. Finally, I analyze two contrasting

examples of Malawian Afrobeats songs to demonstrate how intertribalism is displayed sonically, lyrically, and visually.

A Brief History of Afrobeats

Despite Afrobeats being associated with Nigeria, the genre was founded on a long history of cultural exchange that facilitated the creation of influential music genres that would later amalgamate into present-day Afrobeats. This history is necessary in understanding the evolution of what we know today as the internationally renowned genre, its characteristics, and cultural significance.

1880s-1940s

At the end of the 19th century, England enlisted officers to keep the growing British colony of West Africa under their control. West African coastal cities in Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone were already a melting pot of cultures during this period due to their exposure to trade, migration, and colonization. The British settler-colonialists living in Nigeria established their own British Police Band as a source of entertainment, bringing with them European brass band instruments. From this, a version of the British Police Band, the Nigerian Police Band, was formed because it was easier and cheaper to have locals for entertainment and peace maintenance. Nigerian musicians kept European instrumentation while adding their local instruments and sounds, thus creating a new sound born from cultural exchange.

During this period (1880s-1920s), some freed slaves were returning from the U.S., and they brought with them instruments, melodies, and Christian hymns from the Americas. The introduction of these foreign musical concepts mingled with West African music traditions to create new genres such as Palm Wine, a genre that developed among Liberian and Sierra Leonean coastal crew workers who played guitars brought by Portuguese sailors and integrated local tunes and instruments with Trinidadian Calypso. The genre got its name from the “palm wine drink that was consumed at communities where early African guitarists performed.” A product of musical migration and hybridization, the genre is characterized by storytelling, rhythms, and guitar. The recordings I have heard of Palm Wine music sound light, calm, folk-like, and bring a feeling of peaceful joy. This music migrated to Ghana and Nigeria.

In the 1920s elite clubs of Accra, Ghana, Palm Wine music would transform into High-life, another fusion of West African, African American, Caribbean, and European musical aesthetics. It had local instruments such as the *seperewa*, the Ghanaian harp-lute, and the local *osibisaba* rhythm that combined the Western drum kit with the talking drum and Afro-Cuban congas and bongos (MasterClass, n.d.).

The Kumasi Trio recorded the first High-life track, *Yaa Amponsah*, in 1928. Early High-Life sounded similar to Palm Wine but grew increasingly more distinct with the development of the genre. Coastal West African capitals had High-life Dance Bands, which were brass ensembles, whereas rural Western Africa had High-life Guitar Bands (MasterClass, n.d.).

1930s-1940s

Meanwhile in the 1930s in Nigeria, a different Palm Wine/High-life branch was growing in the Yoruba population that was coined Jùjú by Tunde King. It also combined local percussion such as a gourd shaker, and much later, the talking drum, with Western instruments such as the guitar or banjo and Brazilian tambourine (Gorlinski 2026). An ongoing musical conversation was happening between neighbors Ghana and Nigeria, and a broader one in “Pan-Africa” as Black musics across continents were being exchanged and adapted.

1950s-1960s

Former African colonies began to gain back independence, and across the ocean the U.S. Civil Rights Movement was at its height. The exchange of Black musics across the North American, African, and Caribbean continued, and Jazz, an African American genre, found its way to the African continent. Cameroonian artist, Manu Dibango, was the first African to have an international hit with his *Soul Makossa*, which was later sampled by Rihanna’s 2007 song *Please Don’t Stop the Music*. This helped usher in Disco music to Paris, with the U.S. catching up later (Sound Field 2021). Yet another genre arose from Southern Nigeria called Fuji, first formed by Yoruba Muslims from Were, which added local instruments to provide a lively rhythm for the normally unaccompanied Muezzin’s call to prayer. Alhaji Sikiru Ayinde Barrister added harmonica and flute and coined the term Fuji (Olaniyan 2023).

1960s-1980s

After independence, military coups began to spread in West Africa and replaced civilian rule with strict dictatorship. Malawi also underwent their own government shift with the independence of 1964 and first president, Dr. Kamuzu Banda, who functioned more like a dictator with his reign lasting for three decades (*Hazel Mak - Music In Africa*, n.d.). Fela Kuti, a Nigerian Jazz musician in his Koola Lobitos group who had just studied music at the university level in London, was encouraged by his mother and political activist, Fumilio Ransome Kuti, to go to make music Africans could relate to. In 1967 Fela traveled to Ghana where High-life was still thriving, and in 1969 he embarked on a soul-searching journey to the U.S. (Los Angeles) where he listened to and played a lot of jazz and participated in the Black Panther and hippie movements. Black Rights activist, Sandra Izsadore, introduced Fela to the writings of Malcom X, further igniting his thirst for social change through political activism. Fela was exceptionally inspired by James Brown's Funk music combined with his political activism in the Black Power movement. It was during this trip he renamed his Koola Lobitos to Nigeria 70. He was forging a new sound that he would call 'Afrobeat' (Grass 1986; Stewart 2013; Labinjoh 1982).

1970s-1980s

In 1970 with Nigeria 70, Fela released the first Afrobeat album, *Fela, Fela, Fela* with highly charged political lyrics in Nigerian Pidgin and Yoruba. He wanted to create a sound by Africans, for Africans, and wrote lyrics criticizing the political injustices happening in Nigeria. This genre pioneered by Fela took heavy inspiration from James Brown's Funk, U.S. Jazz, and Ghanaian High-life, but was also influenced by Soca,

Psychedelic Rock, Nigerian Calypso, Reggae, and Yoruba praise poetry (Saleh-Hanna 2008; Stewart 2013; Ugor 2021). Africa 70 had chamber jazz instrumentation, with musicians taking long improvisatory solos, which made the songs much longer than what is commercialized today.

1980s-1990s

Before this, musical ideas and trends traveled with the migration of people from one place to another, but the introduction and spread of digital technologies enabled global musical migration unrestricted by physical journeys. Nigeria had many musicians, but they were only receiving local or regional recognition at this time. Music from the U.S. took precedence in much of the African continent with artists like Tupac and Biggie featured on MTV. In Ghana, artists took inspiration from Western Hip hop artists and created a new genre that combined High-life with Hip hop which they called Hiplife. Genres such as Nigerian Jùjú and Fuji were undergoing sonic changes as West African artists continued experimenting through blending indigenous sounds with RnB, Dancehall, Hip hop, and Reggae (Grass 1986; Omojola 2009; Stewart 2013; The Root 2023).

2000s

A new sound was emerging, a fusion of Fela's Afrobeat with Pop, Hip hop, Reggae, RNB, Dancehall, and Fuji that used electronic instruments, but it was still forming and did not yet have a name. The increase of technology and its availability combined with Nigerians traveling to the U.S. and Europe for career, education, or travel opportunities contributed to the circulation of this genre. Artists such as P-Square and the

2Baba (formerly 2Face) were at the forefront of this new sound, with 2Face's song *African Queen* from their 2004 *Face 2 Face* album being credited as one of the first major Afrobeats hits (Sound Field 2021; Stewart 2013). The following year, the album won a European music award for best African act (Payne 2026). That same year, 2005, MTV Base Africa, the first African radio program on MTV, was launched, serving as the impetus for the Afrobeats genre to become mainstream (Sound Field 2021).

2010s

In 2011, London's Choice FM launched an Afrobeats radio program and exposed the UK to the genre through 2Baba, P-Square, D'banj, and other artists. The formerly unnamed and unknown genre was now known to the world as Afrobeats, a plural version of Fela's genre, Afrobeat, with stars such as Burna Boy, Davido, and Wizkid. Today, it is one of the most influential genres in the world. Afrobeats artists are selling out arenas, topping charts, shaping the music industry, and continuously evolving (Sound Field 2021). The origin of the Afrobeats genre is comprised of decades of cultural-exchanges from West African, Afro-Cuban and Caribbean, and Western (U.S. and European) musical traditions, making it a musical product of globalization that turned ears towards West Africa and the continent of Africa.

Success

Today, Afrobeats is indisputably a globally recognized genre, proved by artists' award recognition, the staggering quantity of streams and views, and international collaboration. Burna Boy made history at the 2021 Grammys as the first Nigerian solo

artist to take home an award for his album *Twice as Tall*. He has since accumulated 11 Grammy nominations (Adewumi 2021). He won the BET award for Best International Act 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2023 (allAfrica.Com 2023), only losing to fellow Nigerian Afrobeats star, Tems in 2022, who also took home Best Collaboration alongside Wizkid for their song *Essence*, featuring Justin Bieber (Mahon 2022). Another Afrobeats artists from Nigeria, Ayra Starr took the BET award for Best International Act in 2025 (Shumba 2025).

Six-time Grammy-nominated artist, Wizkid, won an award for Best Music Video in 2021 for *Brown Skin Girl*, in collaboration with Beyoncé (“Wizkid Grammy Awards and Nominations, Song & Bio” 2025). Tems took home two Grammys in 2025 (“Tems Grammy Awards and Nominations, Song & Bio” 2025). The Afrobeats artists mentioned as well as other big names such as Davido, Asake, and Omah Lay have been and continue to be nominated for Grammy and BET awards.

The Grammy’s paid homage to the legacy of Fela Kuti, the founder of Afrobeats’ parent genre, Afrobeat, with the 2026 Grammy’s Special Merit Awards by presenting the Lifetime Achievement Award to Fela’s children (Adetayo 2026). These awards signify the Western world’s recognition of the lasting and profound impact Afrobeats has on the music industry.

The shift in the public recognition of Afrobeats was also reflected in the album of 2022 film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* that featured numerous Afrobeats and Amapiano artists. The Afrobeats artists included Tems, Burna Boy, Fire Boy DML, CKay, and Rema. The change from the first *Black Panther* (2019) movie’s soundtrack featuring mostly Black American artists to the sequel being comprised almost entirely of

African artists demonstrates the strengthened celebration of Pan-Africanism in the entertainment industry.

Looking at YouTube alone, the music videos of major Afrobeats artists such as Burna Boy, Wizkid, Davido, Tems, Ayra Starr, CKay, and Rema regularly stack views in the tens to hundreds of millions. The version of Rema's *Calm Down* that features Selena Gomez has accumulated an astonishing 1.4 billion views on YouTube. The song that took over TikTok in 2021, CKay's *Love Nwantiti* (the remix featuring fellow Nigerian, Joeboy, and Ghanaian Kuami Eugene) has 618 million views, the acoustic version has 259 million, and the North African remix featuring Moroccan rapper ElGrandeToto has 147 million. This is only a sample of the impact Afrobeats has had around the world.

The internationally adopted subgenres I have encountered the most in my daily listening are Afropop, AfroRNB, and AfroHipHop. The dabbling in Afrobeats by international artists is a testimony to the impact the genre has on the global musical conversation, with collaborations between Afrobeats artists and established artists in their respective genres such as Wizkid with Drake, Davido, Lojay, and Wizkid with Chris Brown, Tems, Shatta Wale, Major Lazer, and WizKid with Beyonce, Rema with Selena Gomez, Fireboy DML and Burna Boy with Ed Sheeran, French Montana with Swae Lee, Amaarae, and Kali Uchis, Tems with Dave, CKay with PinkPanthress, and Burna Boy with Shakira just to name a few examples. These collaborations are evidence of the genre's broader commercial circulation. The awards, views and streams, and collaborations are evidence for the recognition that Afrobeats artists and the genre are receiving, a recognition that extended to Malawi before its explosive success in the Western world.

Characteristics

Afrobeats is not a single genre, but rather, an umbrella genre inclusive of numerous sub-genres that are typically labeled by adding the prefix ‘Afro’ in front of the predominant partner genre. For example, Afropop, one of the most commercialized subgenres, AfroRNB, Afrogospel, and more. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on the three subgenres I listed: Afropop, AfroRNB, and Afrogospel due to their prevalence in the current Malawian music industry. An ambiguous and undefined term frequently thrown around is Afrofusion, which I will avoid using for the sake of specificity, as it is not a clearly defined subgenre and can incite confusion.¹⁴

Language

Nigerian Afrobeats artists often use English mixed with Nigerian Pidgin and local languages such as Yoruba or Igbo. Artists from other countries will use their local languages, English, and their own versions of Pidgin. As will be shown in this chapter, Malawian musicians primarily sing in Chichewa and at times code-switch with English, something that has been done by Malawian musicians since the 1950s when banjo musicians sung *dale wanga* or “my darling” (Kayambazinthu 2010). The advantage of using at least some English in songs is the accessibility to a global audience, which has likely promoted the genre to achieve international recognition and longevity (Gaudio 2011).

¹⁴ The subgenres are sometimes written with a hyphen between (i.e. Afro-Pop), but I will forgo the hyphen in this thesis.

Sonic Features

Unlike the live jazz chamber ensemble of Afrobeat, the instrumentation in Afrobeats can be electronically produced on a DAW, physical instruments, or a combination. A trend I have noticed is that many songs, whether made with live instruments in the studio or not, are heavily processed and with added effects that can only be produced electronically. However, artists oftentimes perform with live musicians, giving the songs a fresh-sounding arrangement for audiences.

One example is the NPR Tiny Desk performance of Tems' Ice T wherein the accompaniment of live musicians shifts the sound from the recording on her album *For Broken Ears*. Departing from the recording, the live performance changes the instrumentation to add electric guitar and chimes while removing the background vocal interjections, instead giving the backup singers additional harmonic entries. It is also sung in a key lower than the original recording, something often done in live performances for the health of singer's vocal cords. The keys player takes more melodic improvisatory liberties within the key, and the bass line is more prevalent. Finally, Tems and her band added an entire verse with new lyrics and extended other sections for the NPR Tiny Desk performance. Live arrangements full of artistic deviations in tandem with the irreproducible post-production mixing-and-mastering and equalization of a recording are part of what makes live music so appealing.

There are some identifiable characteristics of the umbrella genre of Afrobeats that are generally applicable with exceptions and variations from subgenre to subgenre and song to song. Most recognizably, Afrobeats often uses a syncopated snare drum pattern

(sometimes replaced by a synthesized clap) such as the one seen in Fig. 14a, with variations. The foundational beat and its variations are reflective of a tresillo rhythm pattern (see Fig. 14b), and sometimes a clave is used instead of a snare, further linking West African and Afro-Cuban musical exchange.

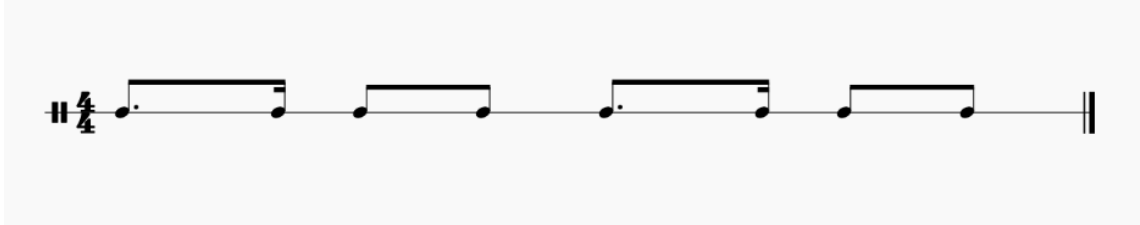


Fig 14a: Typical Afrobeats snare pattern (transcribed by author).

tresillo



Fig 14b: Tresillo beat pattern.¹⁵

Other percussion instruments primarily found in a standard drum kit setup as well as the occasional implementation of electronic Afro-Latin American drums such as congas, bongos, a plethora of auxiliary percussion found throughout the continent, and talking drums interlock with the snare to create a groove. The bass or kick drum sometimes punctuates the pulse with a four-on-the-floor beat in songs, but often beat markers are implied by the syncopated instruments surrounding them. For non-musicians, I will provide this analogy through the lens of semiotics theory (Eco 1976): dark and heavy clouds in the sky foreshadow rain, and one could deduce from the smell of rain along with dewy grass or mud that it rained, even if you did not witness or hear the rain.

¹⁵ sourced from <https://peterhilliard.wordpress.com/tag/tresillo/>.

The clouds beforehand and the mud afterward index the presence of rain. In this same way, syncopated rhythms surrounding the beat index the pulse without necessitating the beat's accentuation. This syncopated rhythm and clap-able rhythm is characteristic of Afrobeats.

Influences from other Black global musics like Hip hop can be heard in instrumentation and production. The electric bass significantly contributes to the groove establishment in addition to the electric guitar, piano, and vocals. Piano and guitar layer the percussion, but with less rhythmic intricacies, functioning more as a background foundation signifying chord changes or as brief motivic embellishments. Vocal lines are melodic and sit on top of this rhythmic and harmonic foundation but simultaneously function as part of the overall percussive drive of the genre through syncopated rhythm, rhyming, repetition, and methodical use of vocables, seen in Burna Boy's song *Ye* for example. In this sample, he is singing only "ye."

Ye

Burna Boy

The image displays a musical score for the song "Ye" by Burna Boy. It consists of two staves: "Voice" and "Percussion". The tempo is marked as 102 BPM. The voice staff is in 4/4 time and shows a melodic line with syncopation, ending with a "ye" vocalization. The percussion staff is in 4/4 time and shows a syncopated rhythm with eighth and sixteenth notes. The time signature is 4/4. The score is transcribed by the author.

0:19-0:23

Fig 15: sample transcription of percussion and voice Burna Boy's "Ye" (transcribed by author).

Afrobeats uses a combination of West African and Western (United States) rhythmic and harmonic structures. The typical time signature is common time (4/4), or four quarter notes per measure. Tempi sit slightly higher than its father genre, Afrobeat, ranging from 100-125 BPM, typically not exceeding 115 BPM. Some common chord progressions with examples of songs they are found in are i-iv-VI-V (*Ye* by Burna Boy), VI-IV-I-V (*For My Hand* by Burna Boy featuring Ed Sheeran or *Xtra Cool* by Young John), IV-V-vi (*Monalisa* by Lojay and Chris Brown and *Blow My Mind* by Davido and Chris Brown), adding to the previous progression as a chordal palindrome IV-V-vi-V-IV (*On the Low* by Burna Boy or *Rollercoaster* by Burna Boy featuring J. Balvin), iv-I-V (*Reason* by Omah Lay or *Contour* by Joe Boy), IV-iii-V-vi (*Dumebi* by Rema or *love nwantiti* by CKay) (Manifxt Audio 2023). The jazz influence can be heard in the treatment of these chords, with the addition of colors such as 7ths, 9ths, 11ths, and 13ths.

Lyrical Themes

Each subgenre varies in its combination of ingredients; but Afrobeats can be generally characterized by its themes of love and lust, party life, celebration of success, and aspirations, themes which carry over to the Malawian music scene. Unlike Afrobeats predecessor, Afrobeat, it is not inherently or overtly political. Although there is nuance: lyrics and videographic displays can have direct or indirect political messaging. However, whereas political dissent was central in the formation of Afrobeat, the goal of current Afrobeats is the celebration of life and a reflection of emotions, meeting listeners in any

mood or circumstance. And the beauty of the ever-diversifying subgenres is that the pool of relatability is burgeoning.¹⁶

Videography

The music videos that accompany Afrobeats' songs showcase a wide range of visual aids given the variety of subgenres and moods expressed. The production quality has improved in the past decade with higher resolution cameras; a comparison that can be seen in the iconic Afrobeats duo P-Square's most popular video, which was published in 2013, *Personally*, and their most recently published music video in 2022, *Jaiye*.

Many Afrobeats music videos may feel familiar to someone in the U.S. because of the apparent Hip hop influences. In Burna Boy's *Ye*, for example, Burna Boy and the actors in the music video have several outfit changes of unique streetwear fashion. The men can be seen wearing flashy rings, watches, and chains, with Burna Boy wearing a heavy-looking chain with of his own name. At the end of the video, he is wearing a white floor-length fur coat and holds wads of money and carelessly throws bills in the air. There are also shots of luxury car and women in revealing clothing dancing sensually. These visual elements of "peacocking" wealth and a lavish, materialistic lifestyle are also found in a standard Western Hip hop music video.

Given the vastness of Afrobeats and its subgenres, it would be impossible to describe every visual theme represented. Omah Lay's *Soso*, for example, has a different approach to symbolism. In the video, Omah Lay is being covered in many colors of paint

¹⁶ An attempt to answer why this shift from a politically focused Afrobeat to the diversely themed umbrella genre Afrobeats occurred would be speculative. I can only assume that as all music does, it simultaneously reflects and responds to social climates.

by female dancers, a masked figure dances in front of him, and the lyrical hook is him begging “Soso” to take his pain away.

Dances can be seen in many Afrobeats music videos, but dance trends and choreography that may circulate on social media are not necessarily built into the music videos themselves, though some inspiration can be drawn. The melody and lyrics hold more weight, and dances found in music videos are supportive visual elements.

Summary

Afrobeats is a flexible West African umbrella with countless subgenres whose sonic qualities, lyrical themes, and videographic elements make it adaptable to many countries, Malawi among them. The mixture of English with local languages, accessibility of electronic instruments, sonic features such as interlocking percussive rhythms and emphasis on Pop-esque melodic emphasis, lyrical themes such as love and celebration, and wide range of videographic themes aid in the genre’s circulation across Malawian ethnic, linguistic, religious, or class boundaries. This is a foreign genre that Malawi and other nations have adapted and continue to adapt and metamorphose to fit their musical atmosphere.

Afrobeats in Malawi

The webbing of Afrobeats spread throughout the globe by way of the internet, and made a home in Malawi, reshaping the musical ecosystem. Malawian artists adopted Afrobeats – namely the popular subgenres Afrogospel, Afropop, AfroRNB, AfroHiphop, and a genre that will be discussed in the next chapter, Afropiano – and have selectively adapted it to fill musical niches.

In the 1960s for Reggae and the 90s for Hip hop, both Malawi and Nigeria were musically adopting and adapting these foreign genres in a local space, thereby reshaping both the genres and their identities (Charry 2012). The confluence of this timeline more directly hints towards a global-to-local channel of cultural exchange rather, meaning that both countries received the Jamaican and U.S. commercial recognition of these genres around the same time via radio and television as opposed to a donor-recipient relationship, with Nigeria being the donor to Malawi.

From the colonial period onwards, Malawi has taken musical cues both from the Western World and the African diaspora (including Afro-Caribbean), seen by looking at musical trends throughout the decades (particularly post-colonial and post-Banda era when musical intake and output was uncensored) and further demonstrated by the international music tastes of my interlocutors.

My friend and musician, Mazani, remembers being exposed to new foreign musics through the radio. He told me “There was one time our TV got damaged, so the radio was like all I was listening to. And it had a lot of programs on there, the Billboard Hot 100, so I was able to just listen to music that wasn't even on MTV yet. And I think a lot of like my [musical] interest stemmed from that time.” When asked about his musical taste, he said “so locally, continental[ly], just outside Africa, I think the genres that I listen to a lot are Afrobeats, Afropop, RNB and pretty much anything and everything. Like my playlists go from Reggae to Adele real quick.”

For the coinciding rise of Hip hop and Reggae in Nigeria and Malawi, Malawians were not trying to recreate Nigerian Hip hop because both countries in these instances were on the recipient end of Jamaican and U.S. commercial music waves. However, the

paralleled relationship of the two countries would shift to an initial donor recipient dynamic, later morphed through localization, with the introduction of Nigerian Afrobeats to Malawi via media. The introduction of the genre was a natural progression given that Malawi had a similar music taste to Nigeria prior.

Mquzama connects the rise of Afrobeats in Malawi to the expansion of television, explaining that the spread of the genre “coincided with the rapid increase in the number of houses that had TVs.” Nigeria has been a cultural hub for entertainment throughout the African continent, most known for Nollywood. MTV was already one of the main channels for the distribution of Hip hop from the U.S. to Malawi and with the creation of MTV Base Africa in 2005 which featured early Afrobeats artists, Malawians caught an early wave of Afrobeats.

When asked when Afrobeats first became popular in Malawi, Mquzama responded, “I would say 2010s, maybe 2008 or 2010.” My other interlocutors confirmed they started noticing it around 2010, earlier than its reach to the U.S. in the mid-2010s with Wizkid’s feature on Drake’s 2016 song *One Dance*.¹⁷

For foreign influences MacDonald remembers “we had a Burna Boy phase we had the P-Square guys. We had the Davido guy who popped in. We had Wizkid. Yeah, so these guys were there. They’ve been there for the longest.” Dan Lu was one of the first Malawian artists to release songs with this sound. His song 2010 song *Part of Life* won Best Afro-pop Song at the 2011 Malawi Music Awards (“Dan Lu” 2010), signifying

¹⁷ The dates remembered by my interlocutors are a few years later than the launch of MTV Base Africa. This could be due to television access, but it could also be explained by the age of my interlocutors at the time. I was five years old and have no idea what music was being commercially engaged with. My interlocutors are around my age, so the recounting of Afrobeats’ introduction to Malawi are from the memories of young children.

national recognition of this direction shift in the musical climate. Given the noticeable influence of Hip hop, this change was likely not contentious, at least among the youth. Other artists who were pivotal in igniting earlier versions of the Afrobeats genre to broader Malawi are Sonye and Tay Grin.

Zambian Alliance-Building

With Malawi's integration of Nigerian Afrobeats in its musical circulation, the genre's place in Malawian music was solidified and validated by its acceptance across the region, especially culturally similar neighboring countries such as Zambia, which has resulted in cross-cultural collaboration. Before Afrobeats, Mquzama stated that "the most prominent music goes to Zambian music," but after "that's when I think Afrobeats started to come into play" Connie echoed this by saying "what's popular in Zambia is usually popular in Malawi," which she sees through "the artists [Malawian and Zambian] collaborating" showing a musical interrelationship between the two sister countries.

Recent collaborations between popular Zambian Afrobeats star Yo Maps and various Malawian artists actively demonstrate musical alliance-building between the two nations. Mazani explained "so the Zambian sound...you've had artists from Malawi that have blown up that side, and you've had certain songs from Zambia that have blown up this side even without having a Malawian artist on them. I love the cross-country collaboration because there has been recent collaboration with artists from Zambia."

Connie, who recently went on a Zambian trip, attributes this exchange to the linguistic and cultural similarities. She said, "we share the same cultures. The language is really similar. The vibe is pretty much similar, so I would say it's also easy to understand

their music.” She pointed out that with another neighboring country, Mozambique, there is not as much cultural exchange because “they speak Portuguese... there’s that barrier so there’s not a lot of Mozambique music.” When in Zambia, Connie said that she was able to change her accent and successfully communicate.¹⁸

Mazani further connected this to “the similarities in the sonics. It’s easier for like the RNB and the Afropop artist to work with like artists from the other [neighboring] country. But yeah, they’ve [Malawian-Zambian collaborations] have been very prominent of late. I think this past, I don’t know, three years? We’ve seen a lot more of those.”

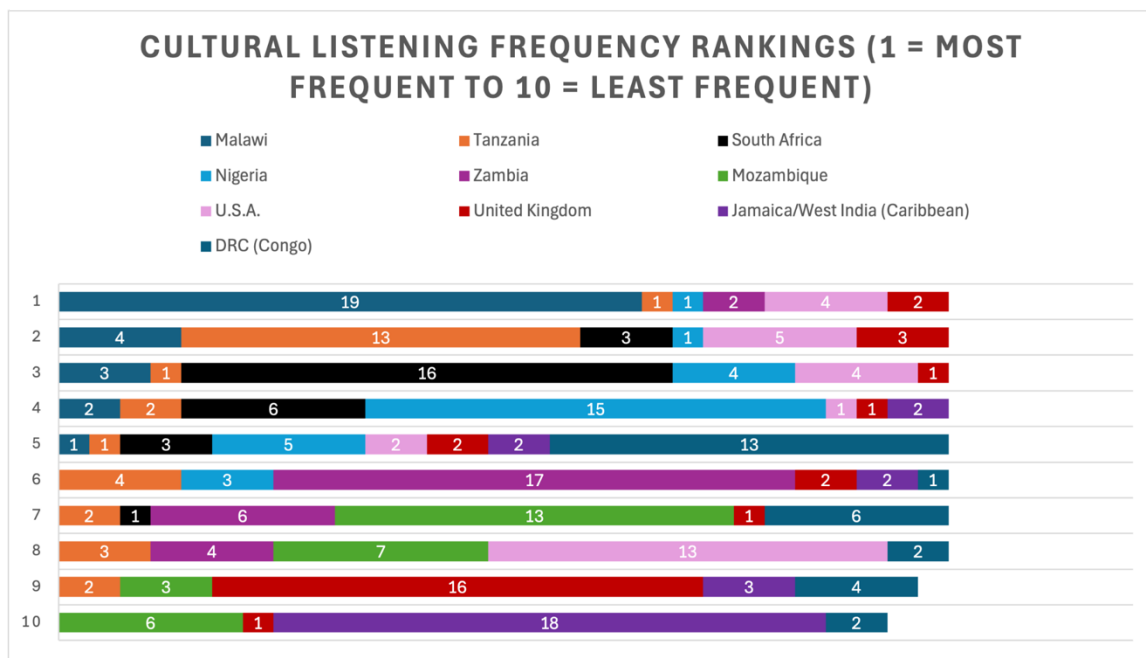


Fig 16: Cultural Listening Frequency Rankings.

¹⁸ It reminded me of the last time I returned to Thailand and how I was able to have somewhat of a conversation with a lovely Laotian family given the similarities between Lao and Thai. Neighboring countries often share cultural similarities, even more so with the closer proximity to borders.

The diverse cultural listening habits of my survey participants revealed that Malawian music is the most frequently listed to. Tanzania placed second in the number of responses; South Africa third, Nigeria fourth, DRC fifth, and Zambia sixth. South Africa and Nigeria as the third and fourth most listened to countries reflects the popularity of Afrobeats and Amapiano in Malawi.

Commercial Success and Regional Visibility

Afrobeats has provided some Malawian artists a recognizable format for reaching regional and international audiences. The rise of both access too and quality of technology has enabled Malawian musicians, producers, and videographers to continually improve and showcase Malawian creativity on an international platform. Success for Malawian Afrobeats artists is reflected in nominations for awards, streams, and YouTube views, and continental collaborations.

Awards

Hazel Mak became the first Malawian artist to win an AFRIMA award in 2018 for her AfroHipHop song *Jaiva* featuring Tay Grin and Zambia's Roberto (Hazel Mak - Music In Africa, n.d.). Hazel Mak is based in the UK, making this song a cross-cultural and transnational collaboration. The AFRIMA awards are continent-wide, with categories broken into region. On their website, they say "The All Africa Music Awards (AFRIMA) is the continent's most prestigious event dedicated to recognizing and celebrating the immense talent and diversity of African music. Established to honor the rich musical heritage of Africa, AFRIMA stands as a beacon of pride for Africa,

demonstrating the power of music to unite, inspire, and drive positive change” with the goal of “peace, integration and economic freedom” (*AFRIMA Awards – Africa’s Global Music Award - AFRIMA* 2019). Since 2018, Malawian musicians have continued to receive continental recognition through AFRIMA and Zikomo Awards, an organization established in Malawi’s closest neighbor, Zambia, that honors African and Afro-Caribbean excellence across disciplines (“Zikomo Africa Awards,” n.d.).

Malawian Afrobeats is also being produced through South African-based networks as two major artists, Onesimus and Gemini Major, both live in South Africa, making them transnational success and attracting global visibility to their home country, thus expanding the interconnected webbing of this genre beyond just being intertribal.

Onesimus has collaborated with major artists from other countries in the continent, such as South African Vusi Nova and Nigerian Tekno. Onesimus has collaborated with Joeboy (Nigeria) and DJ Edu (Kenya) on the *Controller* remix, broadening the scope of the song by drawing in audiences that follow Joeboy or DJ Edu.

Onesimus is perhaps the most decorated Malawian Afrobeats artist. First in 2019, Onesimus won Best Male Artist at the AFRIMAs and Artist of the Year at the Zikomo Awards (*Nation Online* 2022). He won another Zikomo award for Artist of the Year in 2024 held in South Africa with his song *Controller* (Banda 2024a). For the same song in the same year, he also won Song of the Year at the Music Video Africa Awards (MVAA) in Lagos, Nigeria and Best New Act award at the African Entertainment Awards USA (AEAUSA), Best Male Artist at the HAPA Awards in Tanzania, and Best Male Artist at the Shining Star Africa Awards in South Africa (*Onesimus - Music In Africa*, n.d.). In

2025 he was nominated for two categories in the Young Achievers Africa Awards held in Rwanda, and took home Best Music Video, again for *Controller* (Itai 2025).

Gemini Major is mostly a Hip hop artist but has collaborated with prolific names in Afrobeats including Ayra Starr (Nigeria), CKay (Nigeria), Davido (Nigerian American), Diamond Platinumz (Tanzania) (YouTube, n.d.). He has won and been nominated for countless awards, however, mainly for his Hip hop songs and producer work, as he has only recently joined the Afrobeats wave.

Malawi's very own MASO Music Awards locally celebrates musical prowess. In 2025, Afrobeats artists took home the most awards. Namadingo won Best Male Artist, Lady Aika won Best Female Artist, Namadingo's song *Tuli* won Best Song, Eli Njuchi's album *Cifu* was honored Best Album, Driemo took home best music video for *Magini*, Praise Umali was awarded Best Afro Soul Act, and Afrogospel singers were recognized with Kelvin Sings winning Best Male Gospel Act and Theresa Phondo winning Best Female Gospel Act ("MASO Music Awards 2025 in Malawi: All the Winners - Music In Africa," n.d.). Namadingo also took home four separate awards at 2025 Urban Music People (UMP) Awards ("Namadingo, Joe Ikon Rule in Maso Awards – The Times Group," n.d.). At the 2025 Zikomo Awards, Emmie Deebo won Best Female Artist in Southern Africa and Malawi was heavily represented with 29 nominations across various categories (Itai 2025).

Views

The number of views that Malawian Afrobeats artists are getting on their music videos today has significantly increased from earlier publishings. For example, the video

Hazel Mak won an AFRIMA award for in 2018, *Jaiva*, has 39,000 views on YouTube. Onesimus' multi-award-winning song from 2024, *Controller*, has over 11 million views. This does not mean that Onesimus is a better artist than Hazel Mak, but that Malawian music is gaining exposure and acclaim as the years progress.

For an overview, some of Malawi's most popular Afrobeats artists and their most viewed music videos on YouTube are Dreimo MW (*Magini* with nearly 21 million views, posted December 29, 2024), Namadingo (*Tuli* with 11.8 million, posted February 5, 2025), Emmie Deebo feat. Tanzania's Platform (*Hapa* with 3.5 million views, posted April 2, 2024), Kell Kay feat. Zambian artists Yo Maps and Prince Luv (*Bana Pwanyanya* with over 34 million views, posted April 12, 2024), Eli Njuchi feat. Yo Maps on a wedding song (*Yabaya* with over 13 million views, posted June 19, 2023), Theresa Phondo with Namadingo (*Nditayenda Nanu* with over 5 million views, posted September 12, 2025), Praise Umali feat. Kell Kay and Zeze Kingston with a wedding song (*Ku Tiyeeni* with 3.6 million views, posted December 1, 2023), Saint Realest (*Una* with 7.8 million views, posted October 25, 2023), and Dan Lu, one of Malawi's first Afrobeats artists, in a political campaign song for the Democratic Progressive Party (*Lozani Zanu* with almost 1 million views, posted September 5, 2018). For artists who sing in nondominant indigenous languages, there is the Chitumbuka collab of Merchah with Namadingo (*OBeba* with nearly 2 million views, posted February 13, 2024), Tumbuka artist Pop Young (*Welo* with over 1 million views, posted October 11, 2024), and the late Yao artist Walycris with Papah Juxy (*Acalume* with 1.7 million views, posted October 3, 2022). The Zambian Afrobeats star, Yo Maps has also collaborated with Malawian Tay Grin on *So Mone*, posted in 2024 with over 24 million views. The regular cross-cultural

collaborations between Yo Maps and Malawian stars fosters alliance-building between the two countries.

It is worth noting that many of these most-viewed songs are collaborative with either fellow Malawian musicians or neighboring countries, showing that by nature, collaboration expands the reach of music. Alliance-building through cross-cultural exchange in a globally impactful genre such as Afrobeats is a way for Malawian musicians to reach out to the world by tapping into an already popular genre while simultaneously attracting the attention of the world by demonstrating a Malawian take on the genre, thereby obtaining recognition of other countries in the continent. Award nominations as well as the increased number of views on YouTube are evidence of this recognition. Mquzama says about Afrobeats, “I think it does give us more prominence because it’s like you have this genre that’s connecting the continent in a way that now almost everybody has access to instead of just like music that just Malawians has listened to.”

Intertribalism in Malawian Afrobeats

MacDonald reflected on the shift in dynamics between ethnic groups by telling me:

When I hear stories of when I hear stories about the old Malawi, I think they were more tribal than now, and they were more divided than now. We’re a bit more united right now. I think most of us don’t really care what Tribe we’re from. We can easily relate with one another. I think that’s why some of these new genres are able to easily gain traction because we are not as diverse. I’m talking on behalf of maybe us, the newer generation.

One of the genres that has been gaining traction in Malawi for two decades now is Afrobeats, a genre enjoyed in Malawi irrespective of ethnic background. MacDonald illuminated that “we’re not as tribal as the way the old guys were. And that shows in how we can relate to these different genres that are coming in.”

The broad acceptance and engagement of these foreign modern genres across Malawi’s diverse population reflects intertribalism, a theoretical framework proposed by Luke Eric Lassiter, Clyde Ellis, and Gary H. Dunham in their book *Powwow*, (Lassiter et al 2005) which discusses how Native Americans from various Tribes come together in powwows to share their distinct cultures while simultaneously creating a shared, intertribal identity. Likewise in Malawi, foreign adopted modern musics such as Afrobeats have become sites for developing an intertribal musical community, with some evidence of the exchange of musical traditions belonging to specific ethnic groups “sacred, serious, spiritual or solemn” or SSSS musics and other non-SSSS Malawian musics (e.g. Beni of the Yao) (Lwanda 2021).

Musical practices from distinct ethnic groups have historically been appropriated by colonists, Malawian politicians, and foreign NGO workers (Copeland 2022) also being transformed through the adoption and adaptation of foreign globally popular genres such as Afrobeats and Amapiano, a phenomenon that was also observed by Lassiter et al. (2005) in Native American song practices. This can be treated as a furthering of musical appropriation of SSSS musics, but one must also account for the agency of Malawian musicians and listeners who choose with intention to represent specific cultural aspects in search for and in celebration of a modern “Malawian” identity.

I argue that perhaps while not initially obvious, there is a distinct Malawian identity expressed in Afrobeats that is still being developed. My research has revealed that in Malawi, modern genres such as Afrobeats has become a vehicle for the creation of an intertribal identity through the modalities of the Chichewa language, the selection and implementation of specific lyrical themes, videographic messaging, participatory locations, and the infusion of distinctly “Malawian” sonic features.

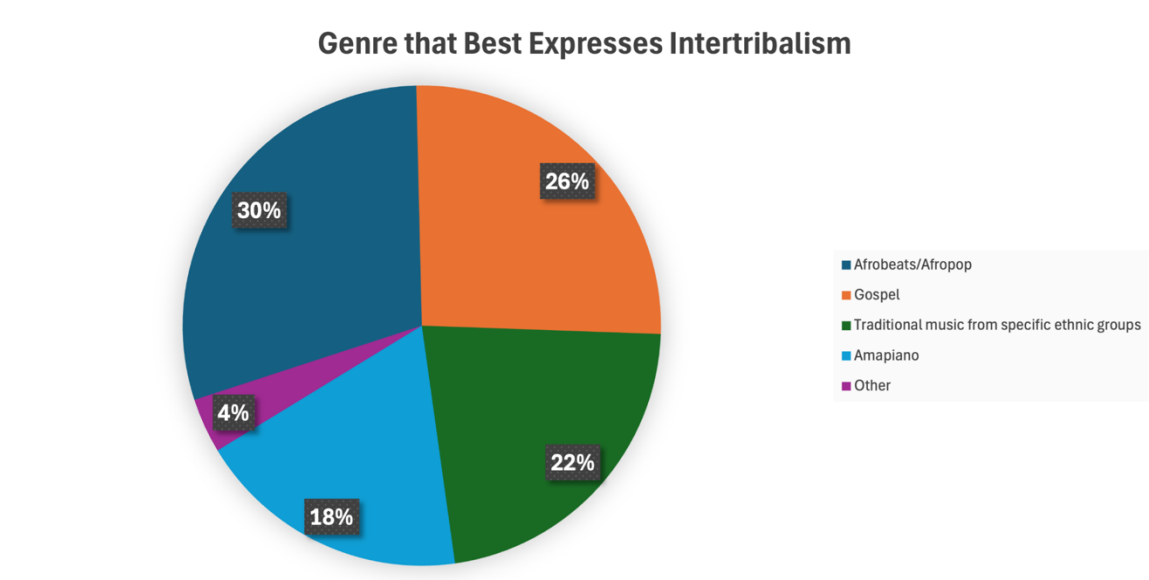


Fig 17: Genre that best expresses intertribalism.

30% of survey participants reported Afrobeats/Afropop as being the best genre that represents intertribalism. 26% selected Gospel, 22% ethnic group-specific music, and 18% Amapiano. Afrobeats surpassing Gospel is significant considering the lifespan and prevalence Gospel music has maintained in Malawi. The balance of votes across genres also helps explain the practice of mixing these genres (e.g. Afrogospel) by Malawian musicians.

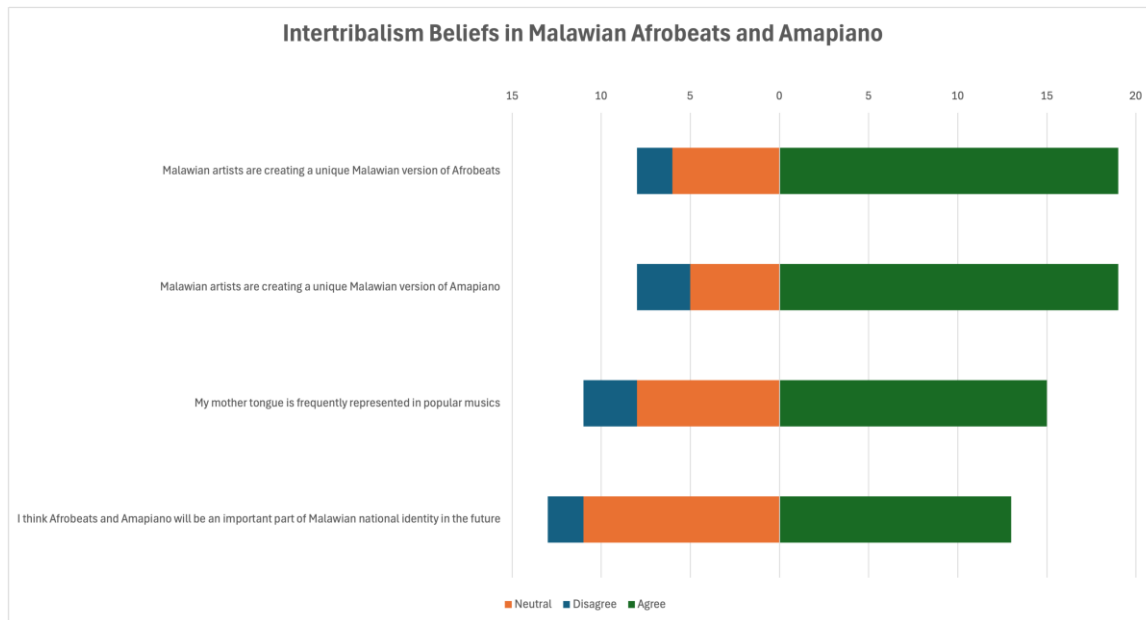


Fig 18: Intertribalism beliefs in Malawian Amapiano and Afrobeats.

The majority of survey participants believe that Malawian musicians are creating unique versions of Afrobeats and Amapiano, but more believed this to be true for Afrobeats than Amapiano. Opinions were split mostly between “neutral” and “agree” as to whether or not these genres will remain part of Malawi’s identity in the future.

Language

Malawi has a plethora of Bantu languages spoken by different ethnic groups, but the one spoken by Malawians due to it being mandated in schools is Chichewa. Chichewa, deemed the national language, is also predominant in Malawian Afrobeats, therefore functioning as the intertribal language in mixed social settings and music. Connie said the reason for this is “pretty much everyone can understand. Not everyone can understand it, but the majority of people, pretty much the entire population.” Eunice elaborated: “the language that is usually used by every person is Chichewa. The main

language to be used in Malawi is Chichewa so despite us having Chitumbuka, Chichewa, Chitonga and the likes...there are a lot of languages in Malawi but then if you want to communicate and hear every person properly you can communicate in Chichewa because we learn Chichewa in schools.” When Connie and I were visiting PYT (short for Pretty Young Thang) and her two foster daughters, they read me their homework: a handwritten passage in a small notebook that had three columns: Chitumbuka, Chichewa, and English. The overwhelming presence of Chichewa in Malawian music makes it the hegemonic language.

Many Afrobeats songs also use English, the “official” language of Malawi. Some songs are entirely in English, but the majority lean Chichewa with some English incorporated. The consistent prevalence of Chichewa in Malawian popular musics indicates a contrasting treatment of linguistic and cultural hegemonies. Chichewa representation skews the hierarchy of Malawian ethnic groups to the Chewa, thereby reaffirming Chewa hegemony, while contemporaneously contesting the hegemony of the colonially imposed English language through the preferential assertion of an indigenous Malawian language.

The use of Chichewa and English in Afrobeats also begets the question: who has access to this music? As shown in Chapter 1, Malawians living in rural areas have less access to internet and technologies through which modern musics are distributed (Bureau, n.d.). Even if the numbers have gone up since the 2019-2020 data collection for the 2022 report, it is still a significant disparity to close, meaning that some Malawians in rural areas may be excluded from these musical conversations due to lack of the resources needed to both consume and create modern genres that rely heavily on technology.

Language choice could be seen as a double-edged sword for some Malawian musicians. For example, the use of Chichewa is indisputably the most inclusive language choice for a Malawian musician to reach the widest audience within the nation, but it still could exclude Malawians in more rural areas who did not complete an education in which Chichewa was taught and is not used locally. English on the other hand, opens Malawian music up to international audiences since more countries in the world speak English than Chichewa, increasing chances of exposure, but further excludes Malawians who cannot speak the language, narrowing their national reach. Mquzama notes that “there are people that are moving from making music in English to making music in Chichewa to reach that wider audience, just because a lot of people speak Chichewa [and] a lot of people don't really relate to English music like that” showing that linguistic localization is a choice that is made for accessibility but also is accompanied with more success.

While English is widely used and seen as a sign of status and education, it is not used by all Malawians, and its use make certain lines inaccessible to those living in Northern rural villages for example. When I was in Mzimba staying with some of Connie’s family, only one of her brothers and two of his friends could speak English. Mum’s friends all spontaneously gathered in the living room one day and tried out some English phrases on me, erupting into laughter after each person tested out their words. It was there especially that I heard *mzungu* (foreigner of European descent) everywhere I went, and I was the first White person some younger children had ever seen.

Mazani said instead of English “almost everybody who, a lot of people who consume this music, like usually the urban, the urban population, they more or less speak

Chichewa. I think even if you're from the north, you will understand Chichewa." The choice to use Chichewa prioritizes a range of Malawian listeners.

The question arises: would Malawians still listen to Afrobeats in another indigenous language?

When asked about language representation in Afrobeats, Connie said "it's mostly Chichewa. Of course, there are some Tumbuka songs, maybe 20% would be Tumbuka. I'm talking about the popular, popular music." She mentions that it would be difficult for an artist just beginning to start in a non-dominant indigenous language such as Chitumbuka. Eunice echoed this stating "most of the Tumbuka songs, I don't think they are that popular. There are certain songs that are there for Tumbuka artists, but then they mix in. They mix it with Chichewa to go and reach other audiences. Because not everybody knows how to speak in Chitumbuka. People don't even understand Chitumbuka," indicating Chichewa is chosen because it has the widest reach across ethnic groups and that songs in non-dominant local languages are less accessible to the general population.

As an example, Connie brought up Patience Namadingo, one of Malawi's biggest names in music who sings in Chichewa, but "has some music in Tumbuka, or some lyrics that he sings in Tumbuka," explaining that "since it's [his music and popularity] is already out there, people are kind of just singing it, some for the vibe, some understand. But then if you're a local artist just starting and you only speak Tumbuka, then I really don't think your music is good unless it's like, you're already big, you know?" She said Namadingo can get away with singing in Chitumbuka because he is already established and "he's just confident with his music and his talent and he also knows that it's going to

be famous in the Northern and also the Southern [regions]. Maybe they do it for vibes, or because there's a lot of people migrating and understanding the language."

Eunice told me that she does not feel that her ethnic group (Tumbuka) is properly represented in the music industry, but that she is "not so invested in knowing a lot of Tumbuka artists that know it's out there" because she is "in an environment that is full of Chewas." She mentioned that she does listen to some Tumbuka songs and artists but does not seek them out and can easily connect with Chewa songs. I stayed with Eunice's family in the smaller town Tumbuka town, Mzimba, but Eunice has since lived in Lilongwe for education and work. This rural-urban migration taken by many young adults like Eunice may play a role in the perpetuation of Chichewa hegemony in the music industry, given that the population in urban cities such as Lilongwe, for example, primarily speak in Chichewa.

Due to Western musical influences, Malawian musician (extremely underrated in my opinion), Mazani, told me "Before the music I'm making now, I used to make a lot of music in English. Up until, I think, 2021, I released the song *Ngati Iwe*. That was the first time I ever incorporated Chichewa in any of my music. And I think a lot of the music that came after that has had a lot of Chichewa and English like bits. I kind of took a rebrand of some sort as far as the sound went, as far as the languages. So yeah, I would say those two are the ones that I'm using a lot. I have used Tumbuka on one, is it one song or two? But the one that I can remember off the top of my head right now is *Ndi Iweyo*." He told me he used Tumbuka in collaboration with Tumbuka artists and because he has some Tumbuka heritage on his maternal side. Mazani's dabbling in Tumbuka could have gained him the respect of Tumbuka music consumers because he said "I realized that I

there's a lot more Tumbuka and I think Chewa people that like listen to my music. I'd like to believe compared to like the other Tribes, those are the ones that have maybe because they heard a specific song and even like the title the last tape that I put out, not the full piece but the other one, the title is in Tumbuka. So, I think it's stuff like that, you know, like these two Tribes are the ones that are looking at me and thinking, 'yeah, he's ours,'" exemplifying both a sense of individual ethnic group pride as well as intertribalism.

When asked about why he made the switch to singing mostly in his mother tongue, Chichewa, he answered "I just feel like there's certain things that can be said better in Chichewa, and then there's just certain things that can be said better in English. I think I am lucky I can compose in both languages." This shows the agency of individual artists in the selection of language. He went on to say about code-switching "it's a bit hard to strike the perfect balance between the two. But I think I was able to do it well because I don't think I lost any of the people that were listening to me before. I feel like if anything, I just gained a lot more on the way. I think just reach or appeal to a lot more of the Malawian audience." The expansion of Mazani's audience after the switch to singing mostly in Chichewa shows language choice as effective in connecting with Malawian audiences and is evidence for intertribalism.

The switch, however, was not made with an artistic rather than commercial aim yet resulted in broader Malawian appeal. He said:

I don't think for me the decision was a commercial decision per se. I think it just happened when it happened. At the point that I was leaning more into Chichewa, I had gotten to a point where I was like, "okay, I have done this, but I want to try

something new, some sort of a challenge in a way.” I just wanted to tell stories that were closer to home. And I think the best way to do that was to start incorporating a lot more Chichewa. So, I guess it just helped me now in the commercial side because it did really, like it came with some growth.

Perhaps the authenticity of musical choices by Malawian musicians can be felt, and result in positive reception. Many of my friends are fans of Mazani. Mquzama, in reference to Mazani told me “One of the artists that I listened to recently switched from being a predominantly English artist to kind of infusing more local and more native languages, which is Chichewa, in his music. And in a way, I like his music more now,” and that he appreciates that Mazani has now “traditionally infused concepts to songs.”

When asked which song of his songs is his favorite, Mazani first identified *Ngati Iwe*, due to it being his first song in his mother tongue, Chichewa, but also due to its impact. He said, “I’ve had people over the years just hit me up and tell me, ‘this song got me through a certain time.’ So, what the song is about is I’m basically telling the girl ‘You deserve to be treated a lot better, you deserve someone that sees you for the gem that you are’ and I think a lot of women, because that’s mostly my audience, could relate to that one. I would say *Ngati Iwe*, for that reason.” A love song in Chichewa can generate cross-ethnic resonance in a multilingual Malawi because it is the language native to Malawi that most Malawians speak, and the choice to use Chichewa instead of English intentionally makes the music by and for Malawians. In Malawian Afrobeats, the utilization of indigenous languages, namely Chichewa, when paired with relatable themes, melds layers of intertribal connection.

Themes

This brings us to the themes commonly found in Malawian Afrobeats: encouragement, worship, and love, which I will explore through the lyrical analysis of three songs: *Tempolale* by Eli Njuchi, *Tuli* by Namadingo, and *Controller* by Onesimus. I selected these songs for their relevance, recency, and thematic representation. All three songs are popular modern Malawian Afrobeats songs released within the last two years. *Tempolale*'s dominating theme is encouragement but includes Christian imagery in support of encouragement. *Tuli* is a religious song, but also includes comforting prose, demonstrating how themes of encouragement and worship intersect. Finally, *Controller* is an example of how the topic of lust is approached through metaphor within the larger scope of romantic love and still incorporating Christian imagery.

Encouragement

Encouragement is not a theme exclusive to Malawi as every person experiences hardships in their personal lives, but it is a theme made more relatable to Malawians given the economic state, ranking as one of the four poorest countries in the world ("Malawi | World Bank Group," n.d.). Many of my friends within Malawi have expressed the desire to leave the country in search of a better life because the state of the current economy is not conducive to their future goals. Relocation becomes difficult for several reasons, namely financial, creating a feedback loop of this feeling of "stuckness" or "waithood" (Lipenga 2023) that several youth experience. MacDonald echoed this in my interview with him, saying "if you find a Malawian, most of them will tell you that 'I'm tired of this place. I just want to go somewhere else and not think about this place,'" further connecting it to music preferences of foreign adopted musics, reflecting "so

maybe that also is something that contributes to us having a preference of international genres, international things to locally made music and locally made whatsoever.”

Education is often a way out for lucky Malawian youth and has been for my friend Connie who studied first at an international high school in Norway, then in undergrad in the U.S. (where we met), and after returning back to Malawi, she could not find a job and is now in Germany pursuing a master’s degree. Some of my other friends want to do the same, but there is a high cost to take the required tests to apply to universities abroad. For example, one test costs 5x as much as one of my friends is currently making, and if they do not pass, they would have to pay to take it again. Therefore, younger generations struggling through the economy in Malawi resonate with musical messages of hope, aspirations, and encouragement.

Eli Njuchi’s *Tempolale* is a song of encouragement to his partner who is struggling in life. The song title, *Tempolale*, can be translated from Chichewa to English as “Temporary.” He reassures her by singing “*Mavuto athuwa nga tempolale; Misozi yathuyi nja tempolale*” which translates to “These problems of ours, they are temporary; These tears of ours, they are temporary.” In the first verse, after cites Biblical examples saying:

“About wealth, remember Job, my lover

About a child, remember Sarah

God gives and takes, my lover.”

Mentions of God and Biblical characters in songs that could otherwise be considered secular connect the theme of encouragement to Christian morals, something

that frequently occurs in Malawian Afropop, meaning that many Malawians find comfort and encouragement through religion.

Njuchi sings:

“Amalanda, amapatsa, my lover

Taona zambiri kufika lero, my lover

Nde ulova n’kachani (my lover)

Kusowa ya rent n’kachani (my lover)

Kusowa ma fees n’kachani (my lover)” translating in English to:

“God gives and takes, my lover

We have seen a lot to get here, my lover

So what is unemployment? (my lover)

So what is lacking rent? (my lover)

What is lacking school fees? (my lover).”

Here he mentions specific struggles of unemployment and financial hardships that Malawians, particularly the less economically established youth, are experiencing, struggles I have heard my friends mention on several occasions in casual conversation. This is reflected in the combined data from 2022 on the 2023 United States Census Bureau report showing that over half of Malawi’s population is youth, with a high dependency ratio of 75.5% (Bureau, n.d.) and the 2024 data posted by the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of International Labor Affairs showing that 26.4% of children ages 5-14 are working, and 28.4% are working while attending school (“Child Labor in Malawi: Findings from the U.S. Department of Labor,” n.d.).

The acknowledgement of these specific struggles through song validates the feelings of Malawians also experiencing them, while the repetitive reassurance that these problems are temporary provides comfort.

<i>Tempolale</i> - Eli Njuchi	
Chichewa	English
“Tempolale”	“Temporary”
Baby, don't worry	Baby don't worry
Usamadandaule	Don't be worried
Usamakaikire	Don't doubt
Masikuwa, udzilemba mu diary	Days pass, you should write in a diary
Mavutowa ndi history	These problems are history
Zonsezi n'zakalekale	All this is old news/is in the past
Chonde usadzaiwale	Please don't ever forget
Masikuwa, udzilemba mu diary	Record these days in a diary
Zonsezi nza tempolale	All this is temporary
Tempolale	Temporary
Tempolale	Temporary
Masikuwa, udzilemba mu diary	Record these days in a diary
Zonsezi nza tempolale	All this is temporary
(Mavuto athuwa nga) Tempolale	These problems of ours, they are temporary

(Misozi yathuyi nja) Tempolale	These tears of ours, they are temporary
Masikuwa udzilemba mu diary	Record these days in a diary
Koopsa tadutsa kale, my lover	The scary part we passed long ago
Zachuma, tamukumbukire Yobu, my lover	About wealth, remember Job, my lover
Zamwana, tamukumbukire Sarah	About a child, remember Sarah
Amalanda, amapatsa, my lover	God gives and takes, my lover
Taona zambiri kufika lero, my lover	We have seen a lot to get here, my lover
Nde ulova n'kachani (my lover)	So what is unemployment? (my lover)
Kusowa ya rent n'kachani (my lover)	So what is lacking rent? (my lover)
Kusowa ma fees n'kachani (my lover)	What is lacking school fees? (my lover)
Zonsezi nza tempolale	All this is temporary
(Mavuto athuwa nga) Tempolale	These problems of ours, they are temporary
(Misozi yathuyi nja) Tempolale	These tears of ours, they are temporary
Masikuwa udzilemba mu diary	Record these days in a diary
Zonsezi nza tempolale	All this is temporary
(Mavuto athuwa nga) Tempolale	These problems of ours, they are temporary
(Misozi yathuyi nja) Tempolale	These tears of ours, they are temporary
Masikuwa udzilemba mu diary	Record these days in a diary
Olo mdima uophye bwanji	No matter how scary the darkness is
Kunja kucha	The sun will rise/It will get bright outside

Namondwe aombe bwanji	No matter how hard the storm blows
Tidzaoloka	We will cross over
Iwe ndi ine	You and I
Iwe ndi ine	You and I
Olo mdima uophye bwanji	No matter how scary the darkness is
Kunja kucha	The sun will rise/It will get bright outside
Namondwe aombe bwanji	No matter how hard the storm blows
Tidzaoloka	We will cross over
Iwe ndi ine	You and I
Iwe ndi ine	You and I
Zonsezi nza tempolale	All this is temporary
Tempolale	Temporary
Tempolale	Temporary
Masikuwa, udzilemba mu diary	Record these days in a diary
Zonsezi nza tempolale	All this is temporary
(Mavuto athuwa nga) Tempolale	These problems of ours, they are temporary
(Misozi yathuyi nja) Tempolale	These tears of ours, they are temporary
Masikuwa udzilemba mu diary	Record these days in a diary

Religion

The next theme commonly seen in Malawian Afrobeats is Christian worship, belonging to the subgenre Afrogospel. As discussed in Chapter 1, Christianity, first introduced by Western colonists is the most practiced religion in Malawi, with 77.3% of the population identifying as Christian per the most recent recording in 2018 (“Malawi - United States Department of State,” n.d.). This explains the prevalence of Gospel music. In the previous example, *Tempolale*, mentions of God or religion are not always freestanding and often intersect with the other prominent themes: encouragement and love. *Tuli* by Namadingo is an example of how religion is used as a source for comfort. This is demonstrated through the lyrics:

*“Anthuni moyo wanga wakumana nzambiri moyo
Kupanda Chauta kaya bwezi ndili kuti kosadziwika
Zoona miyoyo yathu ikudutsa mzambiri miyowoyo
Koma atate adzayankha munthawi yake”*

which translates in English to:

“Hey people my life has met a lot of struggles
I don’t know where I could have been without God
It’s true our lives are passing through difficulties
But God will answer in His right time.”

Namadingo is reassuring his listeners that just as God has gotten him through obstacles, He will continue to guide them through the difficult unknowns of life, an uplifting and unifying message from a Malawian for Malawians.

<i>Tuli</i> by Eli Njuchi	
Chichewa	English
“Tuli”	(In this song “Tuli” depicts how birds sound, like when singing to the Almighty and in other words in mean “we are”)
Oh oh Mulungu	Oh oh God
Pa zinthu zonse zomwe mwandichitira, (Ine ndizabwenza chani) x2	For everything you have done for us, (What will I give back/ pay back) x2
Sinasankhe kuti ndikhale ndi moyo, anasankha mwini wa moyo	I did not choose to be alive, its owner of life that chose for me

Siluso la manja anga kuti ndioneke bwino chonchi	It's not the works of my hands to look this beautiful
Ine anakonza yekha mwini wa moyo	It was prepared by the giver of life
Anthuni moyo wanga	Hey people my life
Moyo hmmm	Life hmmm
Eh moyo	Eh life
Moyo wanga uli	My life is
Uli mdzanja lake lawamwamba moyo	In the hands of the Creator
M'bale wanga moyo wako (moyo)	My sibling, your life
Hmmm	Hmmm
Iiii moyo	Iiii life
Chautayo	God
Awubisa mungaka yake	Has hidden it in His way/ will
Wamwamba moyo	Heavenly life
Mbalame zimamuyimbira	Birds sing to Him (God)
Tuli Tuli Tuli	Tuli Tuli Tuli
Tuliuliuliuliuli	Tuliuliuliuliuli
Tuli oh Tuli	Tuli oh Tuli
Tuliuliuliuliuli	Tuliuliuliuliuli

Anthuni moyo wanga wakumana nzambiri moyo	Hey people my life has met a lot of struggles
Kupanda Chauta kaya bwezi ndili kuti kosadzi wika	I don't know where I could have been without God
Zoona miyoyo yathu ikudutsa mzambiri miyowoyo	It's true our lives are passing through difficulties
Koma atate adzayankha munthawi yake	But God will answer in His right time
Sidapemphe ine kuti andipatse mphatso	I did not ask Him to give me this gift of life
Koma yekha zifundo zake, mwini mphatsoyo	But because of His mercies,
Wazifundo wa chaulele chodzadza	He is a gracious God
Munamodwe abweretsa bata	In the storm, he brings peace
Sachedwa safulumira, Atate ife timadalira	He is never late, we depend on Him
Abale anga moyo wanu (moyo)	My siblings your life (life)
Moyo moyo	Life, life
Iiii moyo	Iiii life
Uli uli uli	Its its its
Uli mdzanja lake lawamwamba moyo	It's in the hands of our heavenly father
Mwana wanga moyo wako (moyo oh)	My child your life (life oh)
Patience	Patience

Iiii moyo (eh moyo)	Iiii life (eh life)
Kamoto moyo wako	Kamoto your life
Awubisa mu ngaka yake wamwamba moyo	Has hidden it in His way/ will
Inamu moyo wako	Inamu your life
Tuli tuli tuli (Utawaleza)	Tuli tuli tuli (rainbow)
Tuli tuli tuli (Kwacha moyo wako)	Tuli tuli tuli (Kwacha your life)
Tuliuliuliuliulu	Tuliuliuliuliulu
Jeromy moyo wako	Jeromy your life
Tuli tuli tuli (Tina my sister)	Tuli tuli tuli (Tina my sister)
Tuli tuli tuli (mayi wanga Stella)	Tuli tuli tuli (my mother Stella)
Tuliuliuliuliulu	Tuliuliuliuliulu
His Majesty my brother (moyo)	His Majesty my brother (life)
My wife Rihanna (iiii moyo)	My wife Rihanna (iiii life)
Nanga Gospel Kazako	How about Gospel Kazako's life
Uli mdzanja lake lawamwamba moyo	It's in the hands of our heavenly father
Anita Karim (moyo)	Anita Karim's (life)
My loyal friend Jobaba (iiii moyo)	My loyal friend Jobaba (iiii life)
Kenwood Carrika	Kenwood Carrika
Awubisa mu ngaka yake wamwamba moyo	Has hidden it in His own way/will
Malita moyo wako	Martha your life

Tuli tuli tuli (Lawrence Mukhuna)	Tuli tuli tuli (Lawrence Mukhuna)
Tuli tuli tuli (Steven Chilenga)	Tuli tuli tuli (Steven Chilenga)
Awubisa mu ngaka yake wamwamba moyo	God has hidden it in His way/ will
Tuliuliuliuliulu	Tuliuliuliuliulu
Vonetta ndi Selva Anayaga	Vonetta and Selva Anayaga
Zinthu zonse zonse mbuye watichitira	For all the things God has done for us
Flezer ndi Trace	Flezer and Trace
(Ife tidzabwenza chani)x2	(what will we give back)x2
Tiwonge Mhango (moyo)	Tiwonge Mhango's (life)
Yowoyani Mponela (inde moyo moyo)	Yowoyani Mponela (yes, life)
Jedeluka	Jedeluka
Uli mdzanja lake lawamwamba moyo	It's in the hands of our heavenly father
Big man Namadingo	Big man Namadingo

Love and Lust

The theme that deviates most notably from what has been demonstrated in some Nigerian Afrobeats song lyrics is the way the topic of lust is approached. AfroRNB and Afropop songs do not only discuss but can often feature lyrics that express sexual desire. Malawians rarely write songs about lust, or if they do, the lyrics are more discreet than what can be found in Afrobeats from Nigeria and other countries. Furthermore, Eunice mentions that female artists “do not sing sexual music. Maybe some male artists, yeah, but not that much like in Nigeria,” showing there is a disparity in what themes are expressed by gender. However, she mentioned that “even men get lashback...like

Controller, for example, that’s kind of a sexual song.” She goes on to explain that “he [Onesimus] didn’t want to let it out there...it does not have that, like, let’s say, it’s not on a print side that it’s a sexual song like the way the Nigerians do it. The Nigerians, you would just go word by word; listen[ing] to this song you’re like, ‘this is what they mean. This is what they’re trying to say.’” She said contrastingly for *Controller* “you have to think about it, that *this* should mean *this* because it was not entirely saying those words [or] putting them out there like that.” To examine the different approach that Malawian and Nigerian artists take for the topic of lust, we can see how Nigerian Afrobeats artist Ayra Starr in her song *Hot Body* and Malawian Afrobeats artist Onesimus in *Controller*.

In *Hot Body*, Ayra Starr sings:

“Controller, controller

I get remote for my holder (Remote, oh)

You make your body slow when I slow down

Put it on a low, no go loud am

You know the things I wanna do tonight, unusual

Put it down, make I take away your peace of mind

E go flow like the water get free supply”

The entirety of *Hot Body*, verses and chorus, centers lust. Lyrics such as “you make your body slow when I slow down” are direct, yet not explicit. Contrastingly, Onesimus’s *Controller* has more metaphorically disguised lust-oriented language in the chorus only.

“She dey do me like a controller

She dey make me lose composure

So I won't delay, no

Enter church, confirmation"

The only line that turns this verse sexual is "she dey do me like a controller," which euphemizes a sexual act. Any of the lines above taken out of context would not inherently be interpreted as lyrics of lust, but the picture is painted with their totality. The contradictory metaphor of lust followed by a Christian practice of going to church and receiving the ceremonial confirmation could show that there is a purity in his feelings for the female subject other than lust, imply he worships her like God (similar to the Hozier song *Take Me to Church* which was not at all about an actual church), show the duality of having a relationship with God while also having a romantic relationship, or it could serve as further disguise for the lustful line before it, making both people aware and oblivious to the entire context enjoy the song, or more likely, a combination of a few of the above.¹⁹

As mentioned by my friend Nholva, the hesitation to include overtly sexual lyrics is in part due to Malawi's prominent religious practices, but it could also point to long-term remnants of the strict control of entertainment Kamuzu Banda commanded during his extensive time spent in power such as controlling the national radio (Lwanda 2014). In a similar manner in which musicians circumnavigated this censorship by expressing themselves through metaphors, modern Malawian artists sometimes disguise culturally taboo topics of lust through innuendos. The doppler effect of not only Banda's media and entertainment restrictions, but perhaps as far back as the colonial period when European missionaries tailored Malawian musical traditions to fit

¹⁹ Although this is all speculation without speaking to the lyricist.

into hymns can be felt in the present-day modest approach to topics which are not treated as taboo in cultures that did not face similar or equally recent surveillance.

It is also worth noting that while English and Chichewa are commonly mixed in popular Malawian songs, it is an intentional choice for the chorus with more sexual content to be in English, providing some separation from Western sexualized culture and Malawian moral ideologies. The population that would be more likely to understand English belong to urban areas where there is greater exposure to the English language and Western culture through schooling, meaning that those who are able to access the lyrics would likely already have the exposure and ability to understand Western song lyrics with more explicit themes.

The remainder of the song focuses on love rather than lust, with lyrics such as:

“Basi ndasankha Ndi mkwatira

Mazda Demio, Ndi Mgulila

Cause I’m in love, I’m in love” translating to

“I have decided I will marry her

I will buy her a Mazda Demio

Cause I’m in love, I’m in love.”

<i>Controller</i> by Onesimus	
Chichewa	English
“Controller”	“Controller”
Eh eh ehe	Eh eh ehe
Butter baby yeah	Butter baby yeah
Yah yah	Yah yah
Bwela pano ndikuuze axse	Come my friend I should tell you
Me I like this Ka baby, oh	I like this baby
Na this girl makes me go crazy	This girl makes me go crazy
Thupi lose kugwida nyesi	My body gets goosebumps
Ndabetcha mtima ndi energy	I have auctioned my heart and energy
Mamie awa, ndi Ka top level	She is in the top level
She dey do me like a controller	She controls me like a controller
She dey make me lose composure	She makes me lose composure
So I won’t delay, no	So I won’t delay, no
Enter church, confirmation	Enter church, confirmation
She dey do me like a controller	She controls me like a controller
She dey make me lose composure	She makes me lose composure
So I won’t delay, no	So I won’t delay, no
Enter church, confirmation	Enter church, confirmation

Basi ndasankha Ndi mkwatira	I have decided I will marry her
Mazda Demio, Ndi Mgulila	I will buy her a Mazda Demio
Cause I'm in love, I'm in love	Cause I'm in love, I'm in love
Ndalimba mtima ndi mkwatira	I am certain, I will marry her
Benz, Beema yo, Ndi Mgulila	Whether a Benz or a BMW, I will buy her
Cause I'm in love, I'm in love	Cause I'm in love, I'm in love
She got me feeling like, ah ah ah ah ah ah	She has me feeling like, ah ah ah ah ah ah
She got me feeling like ayo ayo ayo	She has me feeling like ayo ayo ayo
She got me feeling like, ah ah ah ah ah ah	She has me feeling like, ah ah ah ah ah ah
She got me feeling like ayo ayo ayo	She has me feeling like ayo ayo ayo
No reverse, no back turn	No reverse, no back turn
Alipa 1 out of ten	She is the number 1 in the top 10
Wawina kale no campaign	She has already won her campaign
Ain't nobody fine pass my baby yah	There is no one better than my baby
Ndimumangila chinyumba	I will build her a mansion
Makolo akenso chinyumba	I will also build her parents a mansion
Ain't nobody fine pass yah	There is no one better than her
Ain't nobody fine pass my baby, no	There is no one better than my baby
She dey do me like a controller	She controls me like a controller
She dey make me lose composure	She makes me lose composure

So I won't delay, no	So I won't delay, no
Enter church, confirmation	Enter church, confirmation
She dey do me like a controller	She controls me like a controller
She dey make me lose composure	She makes me lose composure
So I won't delay, no	So I won't delay, no
Enter church, confirmation	Enter church, confirmation
Basi ndasankha Ndi mkwatira	I have decided I will marry her
Mazda Demio, Ndi Mgulila	I will buy her a Mazda Demio
Cause I'm in love, I'm in love	Cause I'm in love, I'm in love
Ndalimba mtima ndi mkwatira	I am certain, I will marry her
Benz, Beema yo, Ndi Mgulila	Whether a Benz or a BMW, I will buy her
Cause I'm in love, I'm in love	Cause I'm in love, I'm in love
She got me feeling like, ah ah ah ah ah ah	She has me feeling like, ah ah ah ah ah ah
She got me feeling like ayo ayo ayo	She has me feeling like ayo ayo ayo
She got me feeling like, ah ah ah ah ah ah	She has me feeling like, ah ah ah ah ah ah
She got me feeling like ayo ayo ayo	She has me feeling like ayo ayo ayo

The general approach to the topic of lust is as Eunice identified more modest than that seen in Nigerian Afrobeats for example, reflecting a shared culture value of Malawian religious practices. She explained why many artists avoid a direct approach or avoid the topic of lust altogether is because of this cultural stigma: "I think Malawi is that

religious. So, most people are kind of reserved. They don't want to go outside the box when it comes to singing, because even if a person sings those secular, the secular songs, people get so worked out, like, 'what did you-- what happened to you? Like, you went to the studio and did this? Like, what did you do?'"

However, there are a few outliers: a handful of songs that express desire more explicitly, such as my friend Mazani's song *XO*, which is his third most streamed song on EP *Lavender*, indicating that Malawians may be open to lyrical themes of lust. It is worth noting that this *XO* is entirely in English and sounds like an RNB song directly from the U.S., making it further detached from being identifiably Malawian. "It performed really well to my surprise because I was a little bit scared before putting it out. Also, it's the audience I appeal to; they're exposed. People listen to all these artists that are saying these things in their songs, so it's like 'why can't you listen to a Malawian artist that's saying the same things?'"

When discussing the discreetness conducted by Malawian musicians, Nholva brought two more examples to my attention: *Chilawe Changachi* by Black Nina featuring Nepman (the title translates to "Taste Mine") and *Kanda* by Tay Grin featuring Sonye and Orezi. For the latter, the title translates to "scratch" and the hook is "Everywhere is tingling, I just wanna 'scratch.'" Nholva explained that everyone knows what these songs mean if they pay attention to the lyrics but that "they're all indirect in that they rely on innuendo, never stating direct words for intercourse or body parts, just implying." He recalled the same indirectness when listening to *Chilawe Changachi*, saying that it was "never defined" but is understood with the emphasis and "how people play with tones; where they highlight or not highlight." This tactic may be successful in obscuring

inappropriate meanings from unintended audiences because he told me “It’s a funny thing to see when you look back...I remember being a child and thinking he was talking about fruits or something. That’s not at all what was being sung about.”

The topics of encouragement, worship, love, and celebration are not themes exclusive to Malawi, but they facilitate intertribalism because they are voiced through Chichewa, the most accessible language in Malawi and shared social experiences. The messages coming from Malawians in Chichewa provides a more intimate connection to these themes for fellow Malawians.

Music Video Semiotic Analysis

Malawian Afrobeats music videos display intertribalism through their approach to themes of love and lust, the portrayal of daily Malawian life, and further visually celebrates Malawian SSSS (Lwanda 2021) practices through the showcasing of indigenous imagery.

Portrayal of Lust

Using the same comparison from earlier of Ayra Starr’s *Hot Body* and Onesimus’ *Controller*, one can see the difference in Malawian’s more modest visual expression of lust and love from that of Nigerian Afrobeats’. In *Hot Body*, the entire video centers Ayra Starr with other women on a yacht and the beach dressed in bikinis, performing sensual dances including pole dancing. This mirrors the more sensual nature of the lyrics as previously detailed. There are no men in the video, supporting a message of female sexual empowerment. Contrastingly, in *Controller*, Onesimus is singing and dancing to himself outside of a car, and a woman (who is in more covered clothes than the bikinis

seen in Starr's *Hot Body*) is mostly in and on top of the car. Few interactions take place between the two, mirroring the more reserved and modest nature of the song's lyrics.

Daily Malawian Life

There are numerous music videos that depict aspects of daily life in Malawi, so I will only illustrate a few. An on-the-nose example is Namadingo's *Sabwelera* in which Malawians, male and female of all ages are in Lake Malawi, symbolizing unity of generations and gender. Namadingo later holds the Malawian flag on a rocky and grassy mountain, overlooking the panoramic scenery in an overt display of national pride.

The music video for *Love Me Now* by Praise Umali and Eli Njuchi shows Malawians in a school setting, a woman carrying a bucket on her head with the backdrop of a mountain, and an old house with clothes hanging to dry on the lines and chickens. The school setting shows the beginnings of young love, something that is relatable to younger audiences who are having such experiences and older audiences who can remember. The outfits worn by the men pay homage to older fashion, perhaps from the earlier decades of the 1900s with newsboy hats, suspenders, colorful button ups with suit coats, and plaid pants.

In Emmie Deebo's *Changa*, the setting is placed by a drone shot of a village with mud bricks and a mix of straw and tin roofs with plowed farmland surrounding the buildings. Men wear Western clothes with a layer of Malawi's reddish dust, and women wear brightly colored and uniquely patterned *chitenjes* hang up clothes on the line. Everyone is wearing sandals. Such details place the viewer in parts of Malawi, whether by memory or introduction.

Another video that firmly situates the song's setting in Malawi is Namadingo's *Mapulani*, wherein a woman in a *chitenje* dress walks through a curtain door into the living room and places a bowl before a seated man. This image reinforces the patriarchal dynamic in Malawian society. Goats can be heard bleating in the background. Two men play *ng'omas* (traditional wooden hand drums with goatskin heads) while women and girls dance in a circle. Something is cooking in a tin dish over a fire. You can see a hand broom made of palm trees outside one of the homes. The friends and family that Connie and I stayed with all had these at their houses, and we used them to help sweep. There is a scene with people working around freshly made bricks drying on the ground, indicating practical physical labor. In another scene, a young boy is sitting on the ground eating *nsima*, a Malawian staple made of corn meal mixed with water, from a plastic bowl. A chicken can be seen wandering around, reminding me of the chicken inside Connie's aunt's house, standing on her couch. Every house but our friend Pilirani's had chickens wandering around. The scenery, the food, the mix of *chitenjes* and Western fashion are all things I experienced during my time in Malawi; images such as these make me feel nostalgic by reminding me of the memories I made from my time there. Videography showcases places, activities, and things that Malawians experience or are at least familiar with in their daily lives, and imagery is a powerful tool for unity.

Indigenous imagery

There are also music videos that showcase traditional songs, dances, and clothing from some of Malawi's ethnic groups. In Lady Aika's *Panado*, she is seen in the opening shot coming from a river carrying a bucket of water, with the next shot showing a man on a mountain photographing birds, contrasting the coexistence of the agrarian and modern

found in Malawi. Later she is in a village with houses made of red bricks and grass thatch and iron sheet roofs wearing Ngoni beads around her head, chest, and waist, getting ready with the help of two female friends or perhaps her sisters. The man from earlier comes into the village wearing the Ngoni *kashutu* headband made from animal hide. They greet and he is introduced to presumably her family for an engagement, after which a party of the entire village ensues, with the couple dancing in the middle surrounded by everyone including men drumming. The majority of the people seen are wearing Western streetwear fashion; one boy is in a shirt with Tupac's face. The traditional mixed with contemporary clothes alongside the interspersed shots of the couple in streetwear presents that tradition has an equal place in modernity. It is important to note that Lady Aika is representing her own Ngoni heritage, but she is singing in Chichewa, reaffirming my claim from earlier that the Chichewa language is the intertribal language of Malawian popular musics.

The harmonious juxtaposition found in *Panado's* imagery paints a picture of the Malawi I experienced in which Connie and I boiled spicket water at Pilirani's house to take bucket baths, after which put on the clothes we had hand washed while squatting over sudsy buckets in the dirt and clothes pinned to dry on the line earlier that day, before we hopped into a car going to a live concert at Four Seasons with high-tech sound equipment and audience members recording the performances on their smartphones.

Tay Grin's *Tcha* is a cinematographic experience of Chewa imagery. It begins with rapid images in a smokey room of a man telling Tay Grin that they have been watching his career, Tay Grin eating something, and then a woman telling him, "You are

ready” and hands him a staff. The next day, the setting is a peaceful landscape of “The Nyau Kingdom” marked by the rising sun. Men are in a body of water fishing with a net. Gule Wamkulu (Chewa dance tradition) masked spirits walk through the fields. Tay Grin, a.k.a. “The Nyau King”²⁰ wears a crown made from natural materials, an animal skin chest-plate and arm bands with body paint. The satchel on the horse he is riding has his “Nyau King” emblem. A child with white on his skin and blackened eyes announces his presence as Tay Grin arrives to with masked Gule Wamkulu performers and women in *chitenjes* shaking rattles. Men playing traditional *ng’oma* drums. There are many dance scenes throughout. Tay Grin is Chewa but grew up living between the U.S. and different African countries, however he was raised with a strong sense of Chewa identity and is called “The Nyau King.” He sings in Chichewa and shows Chewa tradition visually with Gule Wamkulu, yet this is still an example of intertribalism because it is made for public consumption and another point which I discuss later, uses sonic traditions from the Yao ethnic group, not Chewa.

Mumapemphero by Namadingo and Gwamba is a near perfect representation of intertribalism in Malawian Afrobeats for multiple reasons. Gwamba is Tumbuka and Lawi has Ngoni and Lomwe heritage²¹ yet all are singing in Chichewa, demonstrating the language’s hegemonic positionality as the intertribal language in Malawian music.

²⁰ Tay Grin (Limhani Kalilani) comes from Dowa, the epicenter of *Nyau*. His mother, Dr. Jean Kalilani, was a powerful DPP cabinet minister, which could have potentially protected him from criticisms of appropriating *Nyau* SSSS rituals like Gule Wamkulu.

²¹ I could not find information on Temwah’s ethnic background. Namadingo has not publicly revealed his ethnic background. He is from the Balaka district, which could indicate Yao, Lomwe, or Ngoni heritage, and has sung some in Chitumbuka, possibly suggesting Tumbuka heritage. Artists intentionally avoiding publicly naming their heritage could be a signifier that they do not want to emphasize that aspect of identity in their music for personal or career-motivated reasons.

The video opens with a shot of a Ngoni man wearing *endege*, ankle wraps with bells attached, and *ingubo*, an animal hide skirt, worn for the Ingoma music and dance practice. The Ingoma is a celebratory warrior dance during which Ngoni men dance with high kicks dressed head-to-toe in animal skins, carrying shields and spears. The instrumentation is the bells worn on their bodies that jingle with the dancers' movements, hand clapping in a swung rhythm, whistles, and ululations (Strumpf 1999). The Ingoma dance is seen later in the video, with Namadingo joining at one point. It is noteworthy that Namadingo participating in Ngoni traditions is a form of intertribalism because he intentionally leaves his ethnic background a public mystery. The migration of the Ngoni is seen in a few scenes in which women and men walk in a line, the men dressed in animal skins and the women in the same beads seen in Lady Aika's *Panado* video. The women are carrying gourds, and once arriving to a tree, a man sprinkles salt at the base of a tree.

Namdingo, Gwamba, and Temwah each represent the main religions found in Malawi: Christianity, Islam, and Rastafarianism, beginning with Namadingo and Christianity in the first part of the video. This portion of the video shows Namadingo with nuns in a church, the Bible, and prayer. Namadingo is wearing a white *kashutu* from the Ngoni Tribe, showing that traditions have a place in imported religious practices.

Gwamba represents Islam as he is shown wearing a prayer robe (*kanzu*) and hat (*kufi*) while praying in a mosque. Namadingo is also in the back of the group of men praying. This is significant because both Gwamba and Namadingo identify as Christian, as do the majority of those from Northern Malawi, and often perform songs with Christian messages.

Temwah represents Rastafarianism, imagery that begins with a Rasta man smoking, after which he enters a circular building where other Rasta men are drumming, and women are swaying with shakers. They are also seen dancing in a circle outside the building with Temwah in the center, adorning the red, green, and yellow colors emblematic of the religion. Temwah has done Christian Afropiano Gospel songs, but Rastafarianism can also be practiced as a lifestyle, meaning it can coexist with other religions.

During my time in Malawi, I noticed all these religions present, though I only saw one mosque since we mostly hung out in the Central and Northern regions and Islam is primarily practiced by ethnic groups in the Southern region.

The entire video is a cross-cultural exchange given the ethnic backgrounds of the singers singing in Chichewa paired with the visual representation of the three religions and Ngoni cultural practices such as the Ingoma.

Together these three videos are just a few examples of how intertribalism is demonstrated through the visual demonstration of musical practices from different Malawian ethnic groups. By showing these practices within the context of popular music for public consumption, they become intertribally celebrated, echoing Lwanda's observation that "sacred, serious, spiritual or solemn" or SSSS music often coexists with popular music, and that popular music is communal in nature (Lwanda 2007, 2021).

Location and Participatory Musicking

Given that Afrobeats can be heard in a variety of public spaces, the location also becomes a site of intertribalism, particularly in larger cities such as Lilongwe and

Blantyre where the most ethnic diversity is found due to urbanization as a result of opportunity-based internal migration. The U.S. Census Bureau shows the greatest population density in bigger cities such as Lilongwe, Blantyre, and Mzuzu (Bureau, n.d.) where this is also the most diversity of ethnic groups (Mzuzu less so because almost everyone I met there was Tumbuka and spoke Chitumbuka. I cannot speak for Blantyre because I have not yet ventured South). Many of my friends live or have lived in these larger cities for the purpose of school or job opportunities. With so many ethnic groups in one city, the default language heard is Chichewa.

Participatory musicking (Turino 2008) occurs at public concerts through audience handclapping, ad libs, and collective dancing along to Afrobeats songs, making it a location-oriented act of intertribalism. Mazani said at concerts and clubs “you can’t really tell just off of looking at someone to say I think he belongs to...[insert ethnic group]. Like most people are just, it’s the same influence as far as say fashion is concerned. You don’t really get to see people like repping their traditional attires or like their tribal backgrounds as much.”

I am reminded of all the places that I went with my friends where live music was either present or the purpose of the gathering. We heard Reggae, Jazz, and Afrobeats frequently. Nobody in these spaces was conversing about each other’s backgrounds. The only time I heard stereotypes come into play was as we traveled from region to region and I heard some stereotypes mentioned about different ethnic groups, or when my Tumbuka friends had to start translating for our Chichewa and English-speaking Malawian friends as we moved to the North. Otherwise, public musical gatherings are spaces inhabited by Malawians from all ethnic groups for the purpose of inclusive

enjoyment, and Afrobeats is a globalized genre that prioritizes relatability and good feelings.

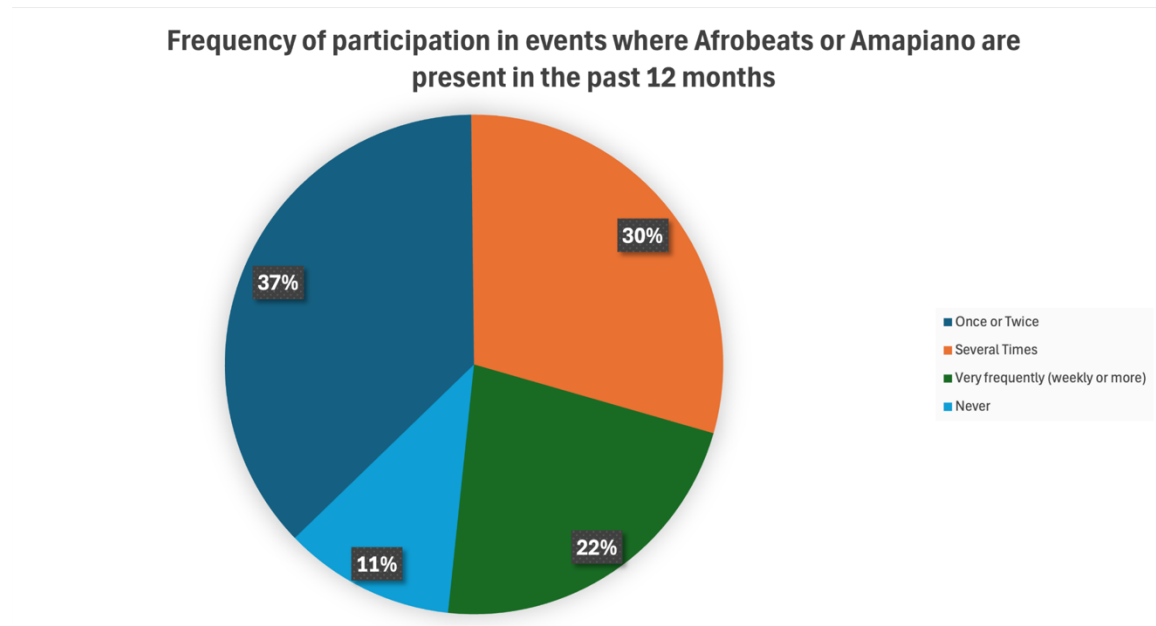


Fig 19: Participation frequency- Afrobeats and Amapiano events.

For survey participants, exposure to Afrobeats and Amapiano in a public setting is frequent, with 22% reporting that they have attended an event including these musics at least weekly in the past year, and 30% reported several times. Only 11% said they had not attended a public event with these genres present. These findings demonstrate the prevalence of Afrobeats and Amapiano in Malawian music spaces which are physical *malo oti timvetsetsane*, or “a place where we can gather” for intertribalism.

Social media is another site for intertribalism and more evidently, cross-border alliance-building, which can be seen in YouTube comment sections of Malawian music videos. I will provide evidence for this in the ‘Song Analysis’ section of this chapter, given that there is a plethora of comments on Malawian Afrobeats music videos.

A Search for Identity: Sonic Infusion of Indigeneity: Erasure, preservation, or natural evolution?

The question arises: does the adoption of foreign popular music genres such as Afrobeats progress the erasure of indigenous musical traditions? My interlocutors' opinions were mostly that there is a degree of erasure or homogenization of Malawian cultures occurring, but this question leads to a more nuanced non-answer, or something in between erasure and promotion.

MacDonald believes “we [Malawians] have lost our identity. Like, our traditions have been shoved out so far because of all these [genres] that that have come in the country to the point that we don't really know what is Malawian and what is not.” He goes on to say that “not many people are willing to stick to traditions. We prefer something that's coming from another country. Like the music people will enjoy here in Malawi for instance is like all the genres are pretty much based on genres that are coming from other countries,” a sentiment echoed by most of my interlocutors. However, another angle to consider is how musical genres and identities evolve overtime through cultural exchanges, with identities (musical and otherwise) influencing and negotiating with one another.

Historical Context

Traditions that John Lwanda (2007, 2021) refers to as SSSS music were not initially intended for commercialized circulation but was first removed from its context by Western colonialists molding Malawian indigenous song traditions to become Gospel hymns (Copeland 2022). Other traditions were later publicized after the independence of Malawi, formerly Nyasaland, in 1964 (Lwanda 2021), and women's song traditions from

different Tribes were curated by Kamuzu Banda into Mbumba, an intertribal political propaganda (Gilman 2004).

Context is in the DNA of Malawian songs and dances; contexts which differ between Tribes. Gule Wamkulu, for example, is a sacred song and dance tradition performed a secret society of men from the Chewa ethnic group, called the Nyau, who dress in various masks and dance as spiritual conduits, teaching moral teachings through stories depicted through costume, movements, and music (Boucher 2012). Another example of a Tribe-specific musical practice is the Vimbuza of the Tumbuka, a healing dance during which the afflicted (usually female) enters a trance-like state in dance in the center of a circle formed by women and children with men playing the drums (Friedson 1996). As described in Chapter 1, there are numerous paired dance and song traditions that are practiced by a particular ethnic group within a specific context. However, as Lwanda has pointed out, there is already an entertainment aspect of these SSSS musical traditions through dance performances and considering the historical appropriation of these musical practices for different purposes by colonialists and political leaders alike (Lwanda 2007), the barrier of keeping SSSS music exclusive to one ethnic group has already been breached, making their integration in newly foreign adopted genres a natural progression.

Malawian Tribe-specific sacred musics, such as Gule Wamkulu for example, when removed from the original ceremonial context and placed within a modern one, take on a new life and ability to be recognized and celebrated intertribally through a popular music framework. It is no longer Gule Wamkulu because the context and ceremonial setting is removed, but modern musics can still take inspiration from and represent some

visual and sonic aspects of these SSSS genres. This can be seen in the combination of certain established Malawian sounds with modern genres such as Afrobeats.

The Challenge of Wholesale Adoption and the Gospel Precedent

One of the indicators to MacDonald that modern genres such as Afrobeats have not been made “Malawian” is that “you barely hear any Malawian instruments in all these new genres that are coming in.” He suggests a potential solution: “if we incorporated some of those local genres and maybe just fine-tune them a bit to be incorporated with Amapiano or Afrobeats, maybe that would change the Afrobeats to sound more Malawian, but that’s not what we do. We literally just take the style of somebody else out there and then maybe just put it in our local language.”

He went on to mention how Malawians successfully incorporated Gospel with “the way Malawians locally did music in the old days,” claiming that “I think that part of Gospel is what represents us as a nation, because you’d actually see it even in the music videos. You would see that this is typical, purely Malawian.”

The “Malawian” identity MacDonald sees in Gospel music but not yet in Afrobeats I argue is still being explored, as Afrobeats and Amapiano are newer genres. Gospel was introduced by European colonizers (Copeland 2022) but has become Malawian through adaptations made over time. While the same adaptations have not been fully explored in many popular Malawian Afrobeats songs, there are thematic, visual, and sonic components that hint towards a recent and growing integration of SSSS traditions and secular Malawian sonic markers into these genres.

Mazani echoes this trajectory by reflecting on the gradual process Nigeria underwent to establish their own sound, saying “it had gone different, stages for it to get to that point where it was easy for the outside world to also digest it.” He further elaborated and claimed Afrobeats has only recently come into its own by saying “before 2019-ish, I don’t even think I enjoyed Nigerian songs as far as the Afro[beats] goes. It started from like 2018, 19, 20, so your Adekunle Golds, your Fireboys, your Remas, that era is when I started leaning more towards like the Nigerian sound.” Drawing a parallel to Malawi’s situation, he remembers how Malawi has historically copied other genres and slowly adapted them over time, saying “even in those times the Rap, the Hip hop that was there around that time was heavily influenced by say the South African or the American one.” He believes that this copying of foreign sounds is “what was low key holding u back. The fact that we still haven’t said, ‘okay, fine, this is our sound and we’re going to keep improving this and we’re going to keep working on this until it gets to a point where it’s refined that we can even export it,’ which I think is what the Nigerians did.”

Sonic Markers

But what does Malawi sound like in this modern context?

Mazani does seem to agree with MacDonald in that not enough artists have leaned into using “Malawian” sonics, yet when I asked what distinguishes Malawian Afrobeats from Nigerian Afrobeats, Mazani identified “the themes are similar, a lot of them. It’s just the sonic, we still kind of have like a... I don’t know. There’s just something about like the Malawian sound still. Like you can tell whether this is Malawian.” This intangible “something” is what my friends and I would label a Malawian “vibe.” This “vibe” stems from sonics that have already been rooted in Malawi for some time, which

is a combination of SSSS musics and the application fully integrated foreign features such as the guitar for example, a Western instrument which came by way of South Africa (Schmidt 1994).

Mazani identified percussion as the most identifiable sonic feature.

I think it's the drums. It's one element that's very distinctive when you listen to those songs. The drums that are used here are made from leather. I'm sure other countries have their own version of those drums. The same way, say in Nigeria they have talking drums, yeah? We have those, they're called *ng'oma*; they play [them] with the hands. It's an instrument that's very true to us.

He added "whistles" and noted the role producers have in adding these elements, saying that "from time to time, you will see people come in and try to incorporate that Malawian sound a bit more" showing there is albeit not the dominant sound of the industry, an effort being made by some Malawian musicians to experiment with more local sonics. Beyond timbre, Mazani mentions the distinctness of Malawian interlocking rhythms as a defining component to "Malawian" sound: "The rhythm is very, I don't know how to explain it, but it is captivating. It's very... the groove, you just feel like you need to move." Rhythmic possibilities appear infinite with the level of diversity in Malawi, however there are identifiable overlapping elements in older indigenous musical practices that may illuminate a Malawian "vibe."

As seen in Table 1 there are many overlapping elements in SSSS as well as non-SSSS Malawian musics such as the instrumentation of three to five pitched drums which each occupy their own role and contribute to an overall interlocking rhythm, with some traditions including the whistles Mazani mentioned in addition to shakers or rattles, bells,

and sometimes struck metal objects (such as kitchen utensils). Clapping, call-and-response, and ululations make several of these musical practices participatory for both performers and supporters of the performers who are often separated by gender with the opposite gender performing a supportive role. In musical practices such as Ingoma, a warrior celebratory dance of the Ngoni for example, only men are the performers with women as surrounding supporters, or in the Chewa Chisamba, an elderly dance for women where men play the drums. From what I have gathered, women never play the drums, but sing, clap, ululate and play shakers, depending on the context and tradition.

In my listening studies of recordings published of indigenous musical traditions from various Tribes, I tracked tempo markings usually much faster than Afrobeats 100-125 BPM range, with a typical range of 140-160 BPM, which is reflected in recent Afrobeats songs to be discussed. This keeps the music lively, danceable, and joyous-only fitting considering most of these practices are celebratory. Practices such as the Manganje from the Yao, Tchopa from the Lomwes, and Vimbuza from the Tumbuka have a swung triplet feel and in Western notation style would be notated in a 12/8 time signature, producing a rhythm with the same name as the Yao musical practice, *manganje*. This rhythm is one example of an intertribal “Malawian” sonic identifier found in modern genres such as Afrobeats and Amapiano.

Shared and similar sonic features of several Malawian indigenous musical practices such as instrumentation, rhythmic devices, effects (i.e. ululation), song techniques, and time signatures promote the possibility of establishing a familiar-feeling or intertribal sound (see Table 1).

Table 1: Sonic Features of Various Ethnic Group Musical Practices.

	V I M B U Z A	T C H O P A	G U L E W A M K U L U	M W I N G O H E	M A N G A J E	I N G O M A	C H I S A M B A	C H I N A M W A L I	I N D I N G A L A	M A Z O M A	M G A N D A	M A L I P E N G A	B E N I	B U Y E N I	C H I M T A L I	M S I N D O
3+ differently - pitched drums	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x		x	x	x		x	
Polyrhythmic	x	x	x				x	x	x	x	x		x			
Triplet-feel	x	x			x		x	x						x		x
Swung	x	x			x		x	x			x			x		
Clapping	x		x	x	x	x	x	x							x	x
Whistles	x	x		x	x	x		x				x	x			
Shakers/ rattles/bells	x	x	x		x	x										
Call-and- Response	x		x		x	x	x	x		x	x		x	x	x	x
Ululations	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x

There is an acceptance of cross-cultural intertribal exchange of indigenous songs removed from their sacred context and made more visible in public popular musical settings. This acceptance is made evident by the engagement in streams and views by Malawians from all ethnic groups. Sharmila Elias-Taijala, festival director of Lake of Stars Malawi Arts Festival explains “In Malawi, traditional music isn’t really a genre per se,” explains Sharmila. “We can say *nyimbo zachin’nkhalidwe*, which means ‘cultural music’ [in Chichewa], but it is more the case that we name each dance, and the music is a part of that dance. Everything has a purpose; it’s not just for entertainment. In most cases,

it's ceremonial, it's ritual. It's to celebrate, to commemorate, to unite" (Condor 2025). She gives the example of Manganje, the Yao tradition that inspired Mazani's *Kalikorha*, is "'increasingly embraced as a Malawian national heritage'" and is used by Malawian artists and "'producers to distinguish their style from that of their neighbours'" (Candor 2025). Lwanda also noted that the *manganje* rhythm is one of the most frequently appropriated Malawian rhythms in secular musics (2021), perhaps because it is also used in heard in musical practices of different ethnic groups and gains public exposure in moments of public display thereby allowing for a more communal claim on the rhythm. This indicates that while many of these indigenous musical traditions are still practiced within their ceremonial contexts, Malawian artists gain the ability to participate irrespective of tribal affiliation on a public platform as a form of appreciation and national sonic identification.

When I asked Mazani about a track that stood out to me, *Kalikorha*, he described it as "a fusion of Afro-pop, R&B and like our own Malawian sounds. It's like a very local like sonic-wise." Mazani told me he was inspired by the Yao male initiation music and dance tradition called Manganje when writing his song, *Kalikorha*. Mazani does not have heritage with the Yao ethnic group (he is Chewa with some Tumbuka on his mother's side) but still artistically draws from Manganje, a Yao tradition. There are other instances of this. Tay Grin's (Chewa) use of *manganje* in *Tchalosi*. Namadingo (Tumbuka) creates a unique sound perhaps inspired by Gule Wamkulu in his song, *Msati Mseke*. One thing that all of these songs have in common is they are in 12/8 time signature, sticking with the triplet feel despite *Msati Mseke* not implementing the *manganje* rhythm. They all use

pitched hand drums²² mixed with drum kit percussion. Another commonality is the treatment of the electric bass guitar, which is used almost sparingly as a calm foundation beneath everything electric bass that boosts the melodic flow and chord changes while rooting it to the percussive rhythms of the lower-pitched drums. They also all use vocal call-and-response with *Msati Mseke* also using the guitar for this. *Msati Mseke* and *Tchalosi* also use the electric guitar to arpeggiate chords, something I have observed in many Malawian Afrobeats songs, showing that adopted foreign musical instruments such as the guitar from South Africa (Schmidt 1994) become Malawian with time; and this arpeggiation is likely functioning as an ulimba would. *Msati Mseke* is a particularly fascinating blend because in addition to the common features mentioned, it includes ululations, hand clapping, shakers, rhythmically complex and varied vocals, as well as polyrhythms. It is difficult to pinpoint which specific musical traditions he is tracing, but the music video shows dancers from the Chewa tradition Gule Wamkulu as well as two satirical dances meant to mimic British soldiers: the Beni from the soldier-uniform clad Yao and the Malipenga of the Tonga in which the men dress in all white and wear a headband with a tall feather.

Changa by Emmie Deebo featuring Quaso also features the swung *manganje* rhythm but is in a fast 4/4 rather than 12/8 time signature. It also mixes drum kit with pitched hand drums and call-and-response. Setting it apart, it uses flutes, experimenting with instrumentation.

Another artist who incorporates samples of indigenous sounds into his discography is Praise Umali. *Love Me Now*, a collaboration with Eli Njuchi, *Chimwana*

²² It could be *ng'oma* but there are so many drum types that it would be difficult to aurally identify.

Changa, a collaboration with Faith Mussa, and *Timamva*, a collaboration with Driemo, all open with an acapella Chewa call-and-response choir, to be incorporated throughout the songs.

Love Me Now is in 4/4 with a BPM of 130. It uses a picked or “plucky” style arpeggiated guitar with the piano laying down chords. The electric bass sounds similar to the songs previously discussed in which it is light and buoyant, tying in the chord changes and the lower percussion. There is a lot of layering and textures across the instruments, including vocals.

Timamva is also in 4/4 with a BPM expected of an Afrobeats song, 120. Again, the guitar is arpeggiated and used for countermelodic purposes. There is vocal layering. Shaker and synthesized clap are part of the percussive interlocking rhythm.

Chimwana Changa is in 4/4 with a quick BPM of 161. It uses guitars that are used to arpeggiate the chords, accentuate certain vocal lines, and as a countermelody at times. Piano is used to establish chords and accentuate vocals. Synthesized shakers and hand claps are used on top a consistent kick drum. Trumpets are used in unison with Faith Mussa’s vocals. Fascinatingly towards the end of the song, you can hear some type of string that could be a *bangwe* (board zither) arpeggiating with another occasional pitch bending string instrument on top of which flutes take over the melody.

One Malawian artist who has stayed consistent, Tay Grin (nicknamed the “Nyau King” after the Chewa secret society of men) began his career two decades ago as a Hip hop artist, and Mquzama remembers him as someone who has always tried to represent a Malawian sound, recounting “the only artist that I think did Afrobeats with a bit of Malawian touch to it would be Tay Grin.”

Tay Grin in an interview said he uses “a lot of Nyau drums, a lot of elements from my culture.” In explaining his unique space in the scene, he said, “I’m a very unique artist in the sense that I have created my own sound. I have managed to perfect a sound that is uniquely mine. I call it Nyau music. This identity is a result of me embracing my culture, where I come from, understanding my roots, taking time to learn what the different aspects of my culture mean when it comes to the dancing, the music, the instruments, stories, our history, where we come from, who are we as a people, what we stand for. Having these keystones understood enables anyone in life in general to apply yourself in an authentic manner” (“Hip-Hop Star Creates Malawi’s Modern Sound” 2022).

Fore fronting authenticity has proven to work for Tay Grin, as his career spans two decades. In the YouTube comment section for his Afrobeats video *Tcha* – which is ironically intertribal because the imagery depicted in the music video is of the Gule Wamkulu, but the rhythm is *manganje* – some comments read:

@popov245

“We should be known with our own Music and identity not always copying Amapiano and others, this is Great Amfumu!”

@eugenerein

“The only bad thing about this video is that it comes to an end..... NYAU KING to the WORLD 🥁🥁🥁🥁🥁 ”

@stuartkamphinda7266

“this is your signature... unique. I think this is the reason why your songs cross border, Malawian culture is adequately represented in your art. keep it 100!”

@YongoWaYongo

“This is a movie eish! One cannot help but admire Tay Grin’s work ethic. Great ambassador of Malawian culture.”

These comments are evidence of the support for the representation of Malawian culture in a modern musical space, representation that is essential to Tay Grin’s message because as he says, “We are going to hand it over to them [the next generation] to continue so we have to prep for them to come and inherit a place that is very rich in culture, a place that we have maintained all the things that make us who we are: our identity, our languages. Artists play that role. We are custodians of culture.”

For younger generations, seeing SSSS and other “traditional” musics in a contemporary space may be the only exposure they have had and may also encourage their interest and a sense of pride in their nation or individual ethnic groups’ identity. This was reflected in the survey data collected, with more participants selecting that they never listen to music from their ethnic group than any other music category. This category also least the “often” listening frequency responses. For the category-specific responses, genres that participants often listen to are ordered: Afrobeats, Gospel, Western genres, Amapiano, then music from their specific ethnic group. Amapiano received more “sometimes” listening frequency responses than “often” (see Fig 20).

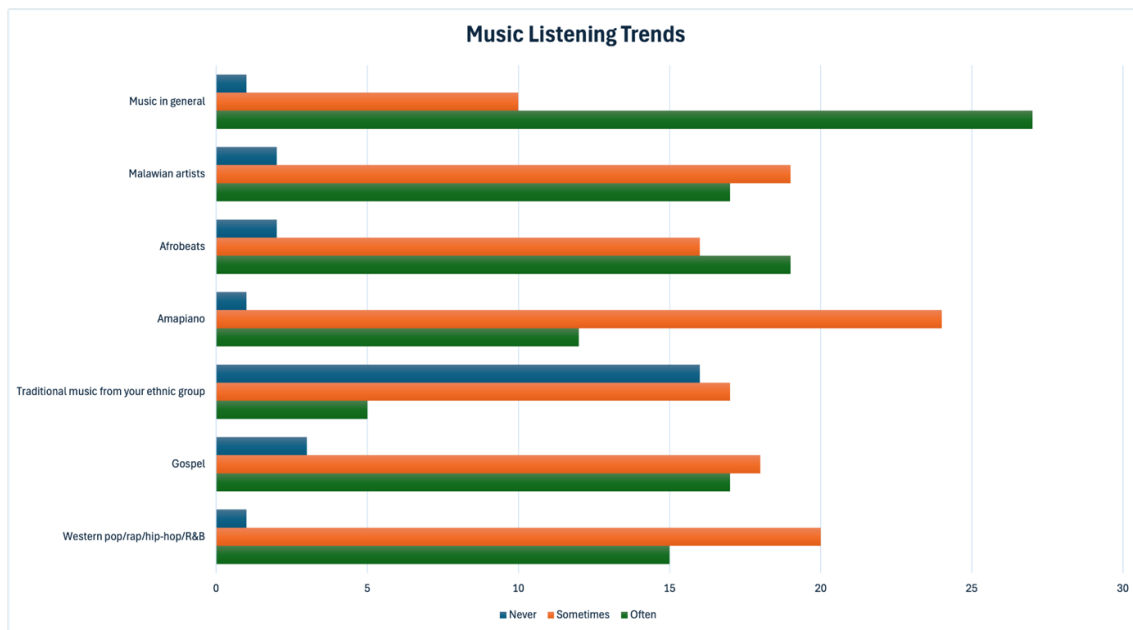


Fig 20: Music Listening Trends.

Adapting and expressing “authentic” Malawian identities in Afrobeats rather than mimicking what Nigeria is doing makes for original contributions to a Pan-African musical conversation. Tay Grin identifies:

Currently, Africa is at the forefront especially with entertainment and things that are trending, culture. If you look at the world, they are tapping into Africa for inspiration, but also you can see that African music is taking over the world. Now we have African artists winning Grammy awards, BET awards, something that was unheard of and now it is happening because African artists have realized that their cultures are very beautiful, that they have a lot to share with the rest of the world, and for myself, all the international accolades that I have are from songs that I fused a lot of my culture. It creates a lot of interest; people want to know “what is this sound?”... “These masquerade [Gule Wamkulu] dances, what do they mean?”

Mazani also believes that more Malawian musicians embracing the diversity of Malawian cultures could mean more significant contributions to the greater musical conversation across the region, continent, and world, saying “What I would love to see more is the artists here incorporating a lot more of that traditional sound into like the genres now, say RNB or Amapiano.”

Some Malawian instruments which are not featured (or at least not obviously so) in contemporary Afrobeats are the *ulimba*, *nyakatangale*, *bangwe*, *sansi*, *badza*, or the *babatoni* (Strumpf 1999) would make for intriguing exploration in the evolving musical ecosystem, though Lwanda notes that the fixed modes of handmade instruments do not lend easily to Western scale systems (Lwanda 2007), current DAW software offer potential solutions through pitch-correction and splicing.

Though the choices of the aforementioned artists have been that of artistic and cultural expression, it could lead to commercial success. Mazani said that with my mentioning of *Kalikokha* as my favorite of his tracks that he would:

...like to believe it's because it sounded very different from the other songs. A lot of the songs that I've heard that lean towards that sound have done well. If they're done well by the artist, they are successful. That specific record is my second most streamed song. After *Tikafike* it's *Kalikokha*, and I'd like to believe it's because of that. We connect with that sound very easy. I don't know if it's something that's in our DNA, but that's always been a part of who we are. That sound has been, I would like to say, proven to work. It's just we have kind of neglected it; so, I'd love to see us experiment with that sound a little bit more. I think it would be easier for us to export that because it's unique to who we are this side of the world. And it's just

not that sound alone. There's like, I don't know, a hundred other sounds that are true to us. I think what I want to see is a lot more Malawian artists experiment with those kinds of sounds. It's right there; this formula, it works. I don't know why people [don't] use it a little bit more, but it works. I've seen a few artists tap into it of late so, I think that's a good thing. All the artists that I know [and] the ones that I don't know [that] are doing well have at least one song that sounds that way.

He points to the unifying abilities of incorporating local traditions into global sounds by speaking to adaptation possibilities by speculating that “maybe the other reason could be we've seen songs from say Nigeria do well in those spaces, say weddings and whatnot. Maybe the whole process is: I could make something that borrows from that tradition of all those areas, all those places [in] Africa, and just put a little [Malawian sound] in there and guaranteed it's gonna play in the same spaces that say a Davido song is playing.” Tying back to the example of *Kalikorha*, he says:

That's like a very safe song to play at a wedding. Even a 50-year-old or a 70-year-old who's never heard the song, trust me, they're going to be able to move to it. I guess that [Malawian sounds] just [have] to be pushed more. People should experiment with that sound a little bit more. I know Malawians enjoy that sound.

Within the context of Afrobeats, the incorporation of Malawian sacred indigenous musical traditions becomes intertribal, signaling the national celebration of the unique traditions that play a role in Malawi's rich cultural diversity and history. The incorporation of SSSS indigenous musics and other Malawian sonic indicators demonstrates agency and intentionality executed by Malawian musicians in forefronting

distinctly “Malawian” sonic elements to public spaces by way of blending with foreign genres such as Afrobeats.

Hegemonic Contestations

The aforementioned mixing of indigenous musics with modern Afrobeats can be seen as a contestation of the sonic hegemony, challenging the complete replication of the patented Nigerian Afrobeats sonic qualities by instead treating the genre as a template for innovation.

Aside from the music itself, there are two cohorts of musicians that challenge different hegemonic classes. The first being female artists, such as Emmie Deebo, Lady Aika, Afrogospel artist Theresa Phondo, and up-and-coming artist Oana whose presence asserts space for women in the male-dominated music industry of a patriarchal country. While there have been famous female artists in the past (largely Gospel), the musical range and presence of solo female artists is expanding to include more secular genres or blending the secular Afrobeats with religious Gospel in the subgenre Afrogospel. Themes for female artists include worship, but also romantic love and mental health as seen in Theresa Phondo and Praise Umali *Pray For Me*. Female artists in music video collaborations with male artists have an equal presence. An example of this independence is in Emmie Deebo’s most viewed song on YouTube, *Hapa*, a collab with Qaso, she is shown as the main love interest with a male actor supporting that role. In this video and many other music videos of female Afrobeats artists, they have their own backup dancers, copying and reversing the roles of what is often seen in music videos of male artists. There are still not as many female artists in Malawi as there are male, but Malawian female participation in Afrobeats indicates a gradual pull towards the modernization of

not only the music industry but also outdated ways of thinking. To see in the music video of Lady Aika's *Simfukwe*, a female artist featuring a male artist (Malinga), wear street fashion, and dance in the center of male backup dancers is a far cry from Kamuzu Banda's Mbumba troops who were treated as a collective accessory for political propaganda (Semu 2002) rather than individually respected musicians and is a testimony to the adaptation of the Malawian music industry.

Whether intentionally or subconsciously, there are artists who engage in linguistic contestation by singing in a non-dominant indigenous Malawian language. Pop Young is a popular artist who sings in Chitumbuka (mixed with Chichewa and English). A comment by user @GOSOGOSOMADALA under Pop Young's song *Welo* reads "The guy is talented.. kuyimba mu tumbuka sikophweka guys.. Salute" which loosely translates to "The guy is talented.. singing in Tumbuka is not easy guys.. Salute."

For Mquzama who lives abroad for studies, Tumbuka representation is essential to his identity.

I think my sense of identity, that aspect comes when, (I'm from the North), so I think that comes when I'm listening to music that's sung in Tumbuka. Otherwise, I'm more or less neutral to it. It doesn't stir any sort of elements or dimensions of belonging in me. But then on the other hand, if I'm listening to music that's sung in Tumbuka, it does kind of connect to that aspect of me. I think maybe because the language is attached to a specific moment when I was very much in tune with the people in my community. And because the people that I usually share that language with are people that are very much around me and the people that are very central to the way I see myself.

The late Walycris sang in Chiyao before he passed away in 2022 (“Malawians Mourn ‘Achalume’ Hitmaker Walycris - Malawi,” n.d.). The comment section for Walycris’ collab with Papah Juxy, *Achalume*, was flooded with support of Chiyao representation; with some commentators speaking to their preconceptions of Chiyao being dispelled due to the song and others being reminded of the language’s phonetic beauty. The following is only a glimpse into the positive reception this song received:

@ChizMo13

“The diversity and beauty of language. We need more songs done in local languages.”

@haroldchintembo1329

“You reminded everyone how fun and interesting the Yao language is, Rest in Power Chief.”

@hendresonbudala9594

“At first I thought Yao can not produce a nice tune. But this is something else. Big up bro, this is a hit.”

@dastanthindwa6372

“Yao has proven to be so musical. Good vibes.. Rest in peace walycriss”

The positive reception of a song in Chiyao demonstrated in the comment section and in the 1.7 million views points towards the potential for Malawian artists to gain a following in non-dominant local languages. Dr. Lwanda informed me that Chiyao was *the* language of popular musics in the 1950s and 60s because many artists came from the Southern Yao regions. Namadingo has sung a few songs and lines of songs in Chitumbuka such as his solo song *Enya* and *OBeBa*, a collab with a young Tumbuka

artist, Merchah.²³ Mazani has sung a few lines in Chitumbuka even though it is not his mother tongue. My friends who run a photography and videography company, VIDEOGENICS MW, filmed music videos for a more underground Tumbuka artist, Warner Chandie. User @angelmtika6049 expressed support for Warner's use of Chitumbuka in *Jaha* with her comment "Longosi mukumanya 🥳🥳🥳🥳🥳🥳 ...Chitumbuka eish mweeeeeeee mukwaniska uli mweee..." which according to the automatic translation means "You all know that. It is amazing how you can use the Tumbuka language." These are a just few examples of the minority of musicians choosing to sing in languages other than English or Chichewa.

Finally, the music industry in Malawi is fueled by Gen Z and Millennial musicians and will gradually transition towards Gen Alpha, which is an expected contestation of generational hegemonic power. As demonstrated in Fig 2 of Chapter 1, the population in Malawi is skewed towards youth but they are not societally the hegemonic class as they are less economically established and likely still striving for financial stability and are more recent political participants than Gen X or Boomer generation, meaning by nature of youth, they have spent more of their lives being subject to and reliant on decisions made by their elders than they have had the ability to accumulate money and participate through voting.

Song Analysis

To explore the diverse range of Afrobeats within Malawi, I analyzed *Controller* by Onesimus and *Mumapemphero* by Namadingo and Gwamba featuring Temwah and

²³ Friends with my friends Gommy and Fundo, who run VIDEOGENICS MW.

Lawi. I chose *Controller* because of its success in views and awards as well as providing a more technical look into a commercialized Afropop formula with a verse-chorus song form and typical chord progression executed by a popular Malawian artist. Contrastingly, *Mumapemphero* was selected as a representation of an intertribal “Malawian” sound within Afrobeats which can be seen visually in the music video, but also in sonic variations. The collaboration of artists is a testament to intertribalism in that Gwamba, and Temwah are Tumbuka and Lawi is Ngoni and Lomwe, and Namadingo’s background is unknown, but the song is in Chichewa. They also come from diverse musical backgrounds: Namadingo is one of Malawi’s most popular artists and has participated in a range of musical genres from Reggae to now Afrobeats, Gwamba is a Hip hop rapper, Temwah is an Amapiano, Afropiano, and Gospel Amapiano artist, and Lawi is an Afrosoul and Afrojazz artist. This song is only one example of modern intertribal cultural celebration in Malawian music, but a powerful one.

Controller

Sonic Analysis

Controller – Onesimus

Tempo: 103 bpm

Key: F major

Time Signature: 4/4

Duration: 2 minutes 50 seconds

Chord Progression: vi – IV – I – V

Form: Intro-Verse-Chorus-Post Chorus-Verse-Chorus-Post Chorus

Instrumentation: standard Western drum kit, synthesized hand clap,
808s, electric guitar, electric bass, piano/keys, backing vocals

Form		
Section	Duration	Musical Features
Intro	8 bars	• Groove is set • Added vocal adlibs • Piano, guitar • Small interjections from different instruments to create the atmosphere
Verse 1	8 bars	• Reduced instrumentation (piano, beat, and voice) • Less vocal activity, increases and we progress
Chorus	16 bars	• Percussive bleed over into the Chorus • Roll into the second 8 bars • 808 bass drum • Voice is doubled/textured in the second half of chorus
Post-Chorus	8 bars	• Vocables “ah ah ah” • Background vocals
Verse 2	8 bars	• Reduced back to piano, beat, and voice

Chorus	16 bars	• Added vocal interjections to help build into the second half (call-and-response-esque) • Last 8 bars has a lot more background vocals; varied
Post-Chorus	7+ bars	• Same vocables as before • Added piano interjections where there is space • No outro, just a percussive roll/fade

Controller by Onesimus is an Afropop song that follows a typical Western Pop form with an even number of measures per section. It has a laid-back BPM typical of Nigerian Afrobeats BPM range (95-115 depending on the subgenre) but is less characteristic of many Malawian musics which have more upbeat dance tempi. The instrumentation, interlocking rhythms, key-centered (diatonic) melodic contouring, and the repeated axis harmonic progression are indistinguishable from what can be expected from a standard Nigerian Afrobeats song. The vocables (with sexual implications) sung in the Post-Chorus “ah ah ah ah ah ah” are reminiscent of Burna Boy’s Post-Chorus for *Ye*: “ye ye ye ye ye ye ye” (see Figure 14).

The instruments are quite flattened, but the interest is in their interlocking groove featuring a double tresillo rhythmic pattern: predictable with just enough variation. The use of a synthesized clap sound as opposed to a snare could be interpreted as Malawian leaning sonic decision given that hand claps are used in numerous Malawian musical

practices. The subtle and seemingly random clave is technically polyrhythmic, which is characteristic of some musical practices (see Table 1; Figure 21).

Controller

Onesimus Muzik

The musical score is written for three parts: Hand Clap, Bass 808, and Claves, all in 4/4 time. The Hand Clap part consists of a repeating pattern of eighth notes. The Bass 808 part features a pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The Claves part is mostly silent, with a triplet of eighth notes appearing in the second measure. The three parts are designed to interlock rhythmically.

Fig 21: “Controller” interlocking rhythm (transcribed by author).

Apart from the use of Chichewa and the metaphorical approach to themes of lust, there is not much that sonically distinguishes *Controller* from a Nigerian Afrobeats song, yet it remains an example of Malawian intertribalism in the theme, language, and in its positive reception among Malawians from all ethnic backgrounds. While aurally *Controller* may not be overtly representative of what one would categorize as “Malawian,” it still showcases Malawi’s achievements in the music field. Its similarity to Nigerian Afrobeats may be what makes it palatable and familiar feeling to international audiences.

YouTube Comment Section Analysis

Social media has become one of the main means of musical dissemination and enables engagement from people around the world. One of the ways we can visually see the reach and reception of music is through likes and comments on YouTube.

The music video for *Controller* created traffic in its YouTube comment section with support from both Malawians and other countries, with commenters repping their nation's flags. Some comments instilled Malawian national pride with no mention of any specific ethnic group. Two comments demonstrating the positive reception within Malawi read:

@barbrachamanza9513

“If you are proudly Malawian say Yeeeeeyah 🇲🇼🇲🇼🇲🇼🇲🇼🇲🇼🇲🇼”

@HenryDaudi-sileu

“I don't think someone from Malawi would wish to hate you, you are putting us on map. This is a great tune to ever come out from Malawi. May God continue blessing you. 🇲🇼”

Other comments displayed evidence of cross-border alliance-building through continental support. Commenters flew emoji flags of countries such as Burundi, Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique, South Africa, Kenya, and Zimbabwe:

@ericballack8219

“I think from Burundi 🇧🇼, Zambia 🇲🇹 Tanzania 🇹🇿 Mozambique 🇲🇼 South Africa 🇿🇦 to Malawi 🇲🇼. We're all here to support you 😊”

@chrishinchilongo4165

“You are an international artist Mr Kalua no lie this is 🔥🔥🔥🔥receive your support from Lusaka Zambia 🇿🇲🇿🇲🇿🇲🇿🇲 everytime when you like this comment i will be coming to watch this masterpiece”

@Cindy_Ayub

“Who's here from tiktok 🔥much love from Kenya 🇰🇪🇰🇪🇰🇪”

@brendonmuganhu3985

“My Malawian wrk mate been playing dis song a lot.... had to check t out ❤️
🇸🇩🇸🇩🇸🇸🇩🇸🇸🇩🇸”

@GeniusMaguyah-un9ti

“Malawi never disappoint African with their altitudes or whatever, that's why I have no choice but leave my love here ❤️ (south Africa loves you)”

The support did not end within continental borders. International commenters showed their love in comments such as:

@Aualeviga685

“All the way from Samoa 🇸🇲 2026”

@LuboB-yj1bt

“All the way from the United States 🇺🇸🇺🇸 This guy is something Americans gather here, Viva Black people”

Each of these comments demonstrate the reach that Malawian music has recently attained in the Afrobeats genre and is a testament to how global and interconnected the genre is. The comments from Malawians representing connecting themselves as Malawian and not through ethnic background indicates that intertribalism fosters a sense

of national unity, and the support of listeners from neighboring countries and countries abroad signify that Malawian Afrobeats is part of a broader musical conversation of cultural exchange that spans across the globe.

Mumapemphero

Sonic Analysis

Mumapemphero - Namadingo and Gwamba featuring Temwah and Lawi

Tempo: 124 bpm

Key: E major

Time Signature: 3/4

Duration: 3 minutes 22 seconds

Chord Progression: I – V – vi – IV

Form: Intro- Verse- Chorus- Verse- Chorus- Bridge- Chorus

Instrumentation: synthesized hand claps, ambiguous piano/vocal synth, unidentified hand drum, electric guitar, electric bass guitar, variety of percussion (African and Western), cymbal/high-hat, many different voices

Form		
Section	Duration	Musical Features
Intro	8 bars	• Rattling of Ngoni ankle bells • Groove starts immediately: synth slightly offbeat • Namadingo sings name of artist “Gwamba”

		• Electric guitar line • Added vocal segments from Namadingo
Verse 1	16 bars	• Melody starts as pick up from Intro • Vocal layering (higher pitched in second 8 bars) • Occasional voice effects in the background • Jingling metal (like from Ngoni outfits) • Low bass drop that follows harmonic progression helps build towards the chorus • Unidentified hand drums played in background • Whistling
Chorus	16 bars	• Repeats main “Mumapemphero” theme • Added strings/synth in the background • Melody is a little more melodic • Cymbal/high-hat punctuate end of phrases
Verse 2	24 bars	• Cymbals/high-hat drop out • Islamic call-to-prayer in background • Gwamba raps • Occasionally the background will drop out • Namadingo riffs sporadically in the background
Chorus	16 bars	• Same as the first Chorus • Unidentified hand drums more prominent

		• Cymbal/high-hat returns
Bridge	32 bars	• More synth, less bass • Vocal layering from Lawi • More layered interjections • Energy is building towards final chorus • Temwah comes in (call-and-response with Lawi) • Percussion elements add gradually and increase in energy
Chorus	16 bars	• Repeats same chorus as before but with more layers both instrumentally and vocally; everyone sings • Whistling • Groove stops at end • Theme from final chorus finishes with Namadingo singing names of artists: “Temwah, Lawi” • Tricky Beats producer tag • Vocable: “Ooh - ooh” to nothing

Sonically, this song is significantly more characteristic of Malawian intertribalism. Whereas Controller is predictable for the Afrobeats genre,

Mumapemphero has variations in instrumentation, time signature, tempo, rhythms, and vocal techniques.²⁴

Some sonic indicators such as the sound of Ngoni ankle bells, the chime-like jingles of the Ngoni outfits, and the whinny of a horse coincide with visual elements in the music video, immersing viewers and listeners alike in the story-telling environment. For me, the most compelling instance of this immersion is the *Adhan*, or Muslim call-to-prayer, that pairs with the entrance of Gwamba who is seen praying in a mosque.

Vocally, the verses are more rhythmic than melodic, entering on the pick-up to the bar rather than on the beat disjointed from the underlying rhythm, creating a sensation of ebb and flow. The chorus also enters as a pick-up; though the melodic line is more connected than that of the verses, both are anticipatory. The degree of variation demonstrated in vocal layering, riffs, and libs is almost improvisatory in nature, and that combined with the occasional interjections of whistles gives this song a participatory feeling. The call-and-response of “mumapemphero” is also characteristic of most Malawian song traditions.

The 3/4 time signature is unusual for the Afrobeats genre but captures the “triplet feel” or swung unevenness that featured many Malawian genres feature (see Table 1). The tempo BPM=124 is on the faster side of the standard Afrobeats’ range but is slower than the tempi of many Malawian genres, which I have clocked anywhere from 130-160

²⁴ This is not to say that *Controller* is less valuable than *Mumapemphero*. Both songs are enjoyable in their own right.

BPM depending on the song. These factors paired with the interlocking rhythms of multiple percussion instruments create a sense of momentum. The rhythmic pattern in *Mumapemphero* is labeled as a standard pattern which is found in sub-Saharan Africa. The groove here consists of synthesized claps on beats 1 and 2, a consistent and underlying and slightly offbeat pulse of the synth (which sounds like a piano with choir affects), unidentified hand drums, and “splashy” high-hats or cymbals (characteristic of modern Gospel songs) used at phrase changes. There are also violins in the chorus, furthering the texture and establishing the axis harmonic progression in addition to the synth.

The complexity of the interlocking layers can simply be deduced from a sample of one vocal line over percussion (see Fig 01.).

Mumapemphero

Namadingo

♩ = 124

Voice

Percussion

2:47-2:53

3

Vo.

Perc.

Fig 22: “Mumapemphero” vocal and percussion interlocking standard pattern rhythm (transcribed by author).

The specific sources of the sonic features mentioned are unclear, but this song capitalizes on aural commonalities found in an earlier Malawian scene, thereby conceptualizing the essence of an intertribal “Malawian” sound.

Lyrical Analysis

Displayed in the music video, intertribalism is also relayed through the lyrical representation of different major religions in Malawi.

Part of Gwamba’s verse is:

“Ena amwaswala ena kusala kudya,

kupemphera modumpha thukuta likungotchutcha

Ena akalingalira moyo wawo mpakana misonzi

Kudutsa mosiyana koma kopita kumodzi koma” which translates in English to:

“Some perform the act of praying, others fast praying while

jumping around, with sweat just pouring down

Some cry reflecting on their life

Different paths but heading to the same place.”

The imagery lyrical painted when paired with the visuals representing Islam, Christianity, and Rastafarianism in the music video are a call to recognize the similarities across religious lines. The line which translates to “different paths but heading to the same place” particularly connects Malawians with differing religious beliefs, therefore conjuring intertribalism.

Another line sung by Namadingo says:

“Ena tiyang’ana ku mmawa kotuluka dzuwa

Ena tiyang’ana pachidzindikiro cha mtanda” which translates in English to:

“Some of us face towards the east where sun rises While some of us look at the sign of the cross,” again, inciting a sense of “togetherness” by highlighting that while religious traditions or rituals may be different, people are all searching for the same thing.

There is also continued use of the personal pronoun “we” which shows unity across religions, joining listeners as people and Malawians (as depicted by the Malawi specific imagery in the music video) regardless of religious affiliations.

<i>Mumapemphero</i> by Namadingo and Gwamba featuring Temwah and Lawi	
Chichewa	English
“Mumapemphero”	“In Prayers”
Namadingo	Namadingo
Nah ah ah ah Namadingo mmmh	Nah ah ah ah Namadigo mmmmh
Gwamba mmmh	Gwanba mmmh
Dzanja langa laku lakumanja ndalikweza m'mwamba	I have raised my right hand
Ndimalankhula zosamveka ndi nkhotu la munthu	I am speaking unintelligible words in someone's ear
Pena ndimagudubuka ngati munthu wa misala	Sometimes I roll around like a mad person
Mzimu wanga ukamva njala ine ndimapemphera	When my feel the hunger, I pray
Chauta amamvetsera ndipo samalephera	And God hears and He never fails
Chauta ah ah ah	God ah ah ah
Namadingo	Namadingo

Mumapemphero	In Prayers
Mumapempheromo timalira	In prayers, we cry
Mzimu umatsika eh	The holy spirit descends
Tikampemphera	When we pray
Mumapempheromo ife timalira eh	In prayer we cry
Mzimu umatsika eh	The holy spirit descends
Tikapemphera ah ah	When we pray
Gwamba	Gwamba
Yoh!	Yoh!
Body language yimasintha	In prayer, there is a change in body language
Angelo amatsika	Angels descend
Zambiri umasimba	You say a lot in prayer
Kupemphera ukuyimba	Praying while singing
Nde umasinkhasinkha	You reflect deeply
Nde umabalarika	You get confused
Kutchaya malilime	Speaking in tongues
Kugudubuka pa kapinga	Rolling on grass
Utaona patali utagwetsa	If you look far ahead, humble yourself, you
ndikungaza	will shine
Pansi sipangamvetse koma	Down here we may not understand,
kumwamba kumayaza	but in heaven it shines

Nde ndimamasuka nditagwada pamaondo, mfana	So I feel free when I kneel on my knees, kid
Mwina sukudziwa dziko lapansili ndinkhondo, mfana	maybe you don't know but this world is war, kid
Ena amwaswala ena kusala kudyu, Kupemphera modumpha thukuta likungotchutcha	some perform the act of praying, others fast praying while jumping around, with sweat just pouring down
Ena akalingalira moyo wawo mpakana misonzi	Some cry reflecting on their life
Kudutsa mosiyana koma Kopita kumodzikoma	Different paths, but heading to the same place
Namadingo, Lawi	Namadingo, Lawi
Mumapempheromo timalira	In Prayers, we cry
Mzimu umatsika eh	The holy spirit descends
Tikampemphera	When we pray
Mumapempheromo ife timalira eh	In prayer we cry
Mzimu umatsika eh Tikapemphera ah ah	The holy spirit descends When we pray
Ena tiyang'ana ku mmawa kotuluka dzuwa	Some of us face towards the east where sun rises

Ena tiyang'ana pachidzindikiro cha mtanda	While some of us look at the sign of the cross
Aah ah	Aah ah
Tiyang'ana mtanda ah ah	We are at the cross ah ah
Temwah	Temwah
Mumapemphero	In prayers we talk to God
Timalankhulana ndi Mulungu amatimva	and He listens
Aah aah	Aah ah
Mumapemphero	In prayers
(Mumapemphero)	(in prayers)
Mumapemphero	In prayers
(Mumapemphero)	(in prayers)
Mumapemphero	In prayers
Timalankhulana ndi Mulungu amatimva	We talk to God and He listens
Aah aah	Aah aah
Mumapemphero	In prayers
(Mumapemphero)	(in prayers)
Oh Mumapemphero	In prayers
(Mumapemphero)	(in prayers)
Namadingo, Lawi, Temwah, Gwamba	Namadingo, Lawi, Temwah, Gwamba

Indee Mumapemphero	Indeed In Prayers,
Mumapempheromo timalira	In prayers, we cry
Mzimu umatsika eh	The holy spirit descends
Tikampemphera	When we pray
Mumapempheromo ife timalira eh	In our prayers we cry
Mzimu umatsika eh	The holy spirit descends
Tikapemphera ah ah	When we pray
Temwah, Lawi	Temwah, Lawi

YouTube Comment Section Analysis

Comments for *Mumapemphero* celebrated its message, the artists, and the song's representation of Malawi. It seemed to resonate the most with Malawians.

@blessingskaleramayunikalua7493

"This is not just a mere video.... It is carrying some deep insight_we are living in a time where religion remains a controversial topic depending on who worships a true God. But the fact is that we all are true worshipers. I like the recognition of ATR African traditional religion, Muslim, Christianity, rastafarian. This is a project that needs a hand of appraisal nice work doc you deserve roses ❤️"

@kingstonenuka5586

"This is master piece 🔥🔥 Namadingo wa gospel can't be compared to any ...big up to Gwamba as usual sapala pa verseTemwa just spiced this up. not forgetting those

deep vocals from the Legendary himself Lawi ❤️ This is what malawi needs most...more collaborations less hate among the music industry as we grow. 🇲🇼 to 🌍"

@mystapresident5013, declared *Mumapemphero* to represent Malawi sonically and thematically well, noting:

"This is a hit, our own Malawian Sound with amazing vocals in it and the concept of the video is out of this world...type of music we need to take to the world...type of music we are so proud to share to our international friends"

@morganntalasha thanked the artists (*zikomo*) for the song which connected her to her heritage, showing that it has transnational resonance.

"Nyimbo za kwatu..... my father's country Malawi. ❤️ I've grown up in Zambia and now living mu Europe. This has spoken to my spirit. Zikomo"

Neighboring countries also showed their love through comments including the following:

@jordaoeliasmuadzangati5901

"The Doc, Big man Namadingo receive your flowers 🌹 All namafans from Mozambique let's gather here"

@NondumisoNkosi-d3k

"Any South Africans here ❤️"

@Sax-Noah-yb6cu

"Any Zambian here ZM am here by stating that Namadingo is a greatest of all time prayers 🙏🙏🙏 representing all religions"

@GraceNgugi-d4j

"Any Kenyans here 🇰🇪🇰🇪🇰🇪"

@kaundamalama8040

“I recently stumbled upon this masterpiece, love saana from Zambia”

The comment section demonstrated that exploring an intertribal “Malawian” sound in a modern genre such as Afrobeats is received successfully and celebrated by not only Malawians, but also those in the African diaspora.

Conclusion

Afrobeats was formed in the unfolding of West African historical events and was made mobile through technology and media. Its webs traveled to the opposite side of the African continent to Malawi. Since then, it has become one of the most prevalent genres in present-day Malawi where it has been and is still being adapted and transformed. Afrobeats has produced success for Malawian musicians unlike ever before in the form of views, streams, and awards, also fostering cross-border collaborations, building an alliance with Malawi’s sister nation, Zambia, in particular. YouTube comments on Malawian Afrobeats songs show the support Malawians are receiving within and beyond the country, which reinforces the genre’s footprint in the music scene and validates Malawian Afrobeats musicians as contributors to the continued development of the genre. The pride Malawians feel for their Afrobeats songs is in part due to intertribal representation consisting of the use of indigenous language (namely Chichewa which has the widest reach in the nation), lyrical themes including romantic love, Christian worship, and encouragement, videographic images depicting aspects of Malawian cultures, and uniquely “Malawian” sonic infusions. The innovation with Afrobeats has paved the way for the next genre, Amapiano, and their hybrid genre: Afropiano.

CHAPTER 3: AMAPIANO MADE MALAWIAN

“I think the more Amapiano finds itself in many places in the world, the more we just honestly want to put aside our differences and just catch a vibe. It just speaks to the testament of music as a whole. I think we all agree that music is a universal language, especially good music. Good music really can just change a lot of things. You just need to feel something in your heart, it just needs to thump.” -Fiki

Connie, Kate, Mquzama, MacDonald and I had road tripped from Lilongwe to Mzuzu. Though the scenery was kaleidoscopic, shifting from concrete buildings to open savannah to thatched roof villages and cattle to bustling outdoor markets and men on motorcycles to mountains and farmland and back again, we only stopped once for chips and Sobo and frequently to bribe the police who routinely wait in a spot on the road and flag passing cars, claiming they have committed a non-existent infraction so they can use their power to get some lunch money (during these stops I would shrink myself in the back of the car and let whoever was driving try to charm the officers). We eventually arrived at dusk and pulled into Mquzama’s uncle’s house, where we stayed for many days playing card games, cooking and eating together, exploring the city, dancing, sharing music, stories, and laughter.

Mzuzu was relatively walkable and we mostly got around on foot, but on this night Gommy and Precious met us at the house and we all piled into someone’s car (I’m not sure whose) to drive to a local nightclub called Queens, where we were immediately greeted by the smell of grilled maize and *chombe* (fish) that a man was selling with fist

sized *nsima* rounds right outside the entrance. We would be back out here for food later, but for now we followed the rumble of the booming log drum through the doors, a sound we would later identify as Amapiano.

I'm sure none of our relatives in say the mid-1960's when the Black Power movement was at its peak activity in the U.S. and Malawi was gaining its independence (1964) would have imagined such a reality where several Tumbuka, a Sena, a Chewa, and an Oklahoman of European descent would dance to South African music in a nightclub together. Much has happened historically and culturally since then, and the world continues to globalize. We are more interconnected than ever before with the increase in technology, made evident by the exposure that my friends in Malawi and I, in the United States, have to the same songs. There is still more sharing to be had.

Introduction

The main question that this chapter aims to answer is: How do Malawians express intertribalism through Amapiano?

Amapiano, while originating from South Africa, is a recent popular genre that Malawians have adopted and adapted to express an intertribal identity. Being from a foreign country, but one with longstanding cultural ties to Malawi, Amapiano is a site for intertribal expression through the nature of the genre's prioritization of a danceable rhythmic drive over the lyrics, the focus on relatable content matter, the circulation of the genre in shared public spaces of gathering (both social media and nightlife venues), the participatory atmosphere paired with inclusive dances made accessible through their simplicity, and the predominant use of Chichewa. My research has revealed that while

initially unobvious, what makes Malawian Amapiano intertribal are the use of indigenous languages (namely Chichewa), lyrical content (e.g. romantic love, Christian praise, encouragement, and “waithood”) intentional instrumentation (e.g. the altered application of the log drum), videographic elements depicting Malawian experiences and cultures, and the infusion of Malawian “traditional” music ingredients namely in instrumentation, rhythmic devices, and tempo.

This chapter provides a brief history of the formation of Amapiano in South Africa as well as regional cross-cultural exchanges before uncovering how and why the genre was successfully adopted into the Malawian musical ecosystem. I then explore the components (listed above) which make Malawian Amapiano intertribal, followed by the analysis of two popular songs’ (*Kusangalala* by Zeze Kingston and Leumas and *Pangolin* by Jetu) use of language, lyrical themes, musical form, instrumentation, and YouTube comment sections to elucidate how intertribalism is demonstrated in Malawian Amapiano.

A Brief History of Amapiano

To situate Amapiano within its broader historical context, a brief recounting of South African history is necessary. South African and Malawian history aligns in the year 1994, marking drastic political shifts of post-authoritarianism which resulted in similar yet branching trajectories of musical self-fashioning.

For some context of what was happening in South Africa: there were protests by Black South Africans against the White-minority rule since the early twentieth century, which only worsened after the election of the White-ruled Nationalist Party in 1948.

Racial segregation was now institutionalized, and violently reinforced, with the blocking “all legal and non-violent means of political protest by non-whites” and the outlawing of oppositional organizations such as The African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1960 in addition to the imprisonment of its leaders and members, such as Nelson Mandela with the ANC. A massacre in which “white South African police opened fire on unarmed Black protesters in the town of Sharpeville in 1960, killing 69 people and wounding 186 others” gained international attention, resulting in a series of sanctions on South Africa by the United States and European countries. The South African economy crumpled “after the U.S. Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986,” resulting in “many large multinational companies withdrew from South Africa.” After the resignation of South African Prime Minister P.W. Botha in 1989, the following year his successor, F W de Klerk, announced the lift of the “ban on the ANC and other black liberation parties, allowing freedom of the press, and releasing political prisoners.” Prime Minister de Klerk also “agreed to democratic elections for the country,” resulting in the 1994 election of the recently released political figurehead, Nelson Mandela, as the first South African President (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian n.d.). As mentioned in Chapter 1, 1994 was the same year that Kamuzu Banda’s “presidency” came to an end and a multi-party system was established, resulting in the first truly democratic election with an amended constitution allowing the expression of political dissent through music and other mediums (Kaspin 1995; Lwanda 2014).

Artistic Freedom

The history of Malawi and South Africa coincides in the mid-90's where citizens brought a newfound freedom and had a tangible input in their government. They were legally permitted to express their opinions without consequence. Hip hop, being widely popular among the youth in the United States, caught on around this time in both countries and was a vehicle for youth to voice political dissent or express their unfiltered realities (Seebode 2012).

Meanwhile in South Africa, around the same time that the Apartheid was coming to an end in the late 1980s to early 1990s, both Hip hop and House were both popular. In the late 90s to early 2000s, DJs created a new genre, Kwaito, by slowing down House vinyls. Kwaito later hybridized with Hip hop and traditional South African musics. South Africa continued to develop its own flavor of House. A couple decades later, in the early 2010s, Kwaito was merged with EDM and a further-defined South African House while still being infused with “traditional” rhythms in Durban, South Africa to create the bass heavy EDM genre, Gqom (ZA 2022).

While Kwaito and Gqom are genres South Africa can be proud of, the pace of trends was rapidly cycling, and it was only a matter of time before another genre emerged. There was still something missing, and the search for a new musical identity resumed. This search led to the development of the genre that would put South Africa on the global map and mark the musical conversation happening across and within countries including Malawi. This genre is called Amapiano.

Amapiano

The history of what we know today as Amapiano is a fresh one, as it only began in the 2010s in the townships of Johannesburg, South Africa, most consistently accredited to originating from the townships of Soweto and Pretoria, although the locations are somewhat under debate, especially since the genre grew in popularity. This was grassroots, youth-led dance movement with DJs at the helm of the genre. Amapiano is notably fronted and pioneered by “The Scorpion Kings,” Kabza de Small and DJ Maphorisa, and is a blend of House, Deep Bass, Jazz, Gqom, and a direct descendant of Kwaito.

Characteristics

What social realities does Amapiano reflect or encourage? “Amapiano is a lifestyle” is a highly circulated phrase attached to the genre with unknown origins. To understand what the “lifestyle” entails and its relation to Malawi, we must first understand the sonic characteristics of the genre.

The name Amapiano is an isiZulu term that roughly translates to “the pianos” (BBC Radio 1Xtra 2022) indicative of one of the main features of earlier jazz-inspired Amapiano: the piano melodies. While that may be the feature the genre is named after, it takes more ingredients to make a dish, or in this case, a genre. The meaning of the name Amapiano preserves an earlier sound-world, though the genre relies on factors other than the piano melodies.

Relaxed yet danceable, Amapiano rests between 110-115 BPM. Its driving force is complexly layered and interlocking percussion, sometimes atop a steady shaker subdivision. Soulful chords, vocals, and the bass all function as part of the percussive

texture. Some Amapiano artists are starting to incorporate live instruments in their performances such as the 2024 Red Bull Symphonic performance of Young Stunna's viral song, *Adiwele*- a collab with the genre's pioneer, DJ Kabza de Small that was arranged for a chamber orchestra comprised of a string section (including harp), winds (including saxophone), brass, a timpani, two drum sets, electric bass, and electric guitar, and conducted by South African female conductor Ofentse Pitse.²⁵ For the most part, all instruments are electronic and performed by DJs in clubs. Amapiano songs are often presented in roughly hour-long sets. On YouTube, there are countless videos in party settings with the camera focused on the DJ performing these sets.

There are many commonalities between Kwaito and Amapiano, but there is one distinguishing characteristic that separates them. The secret sauce, or what makes Amapiano "Amapiano," is the log drum. Traditional log drums are unlike standard drums in that they lack a membrane. Instead, logs are carved with vertical slits in the center. The size (length, width, and circumference) of the log and amount carved from it vary the range of pitch possibilities. The timbre of the log drums is comprised of factors such as the type of wood used, wood maturity, softness/hardness, density, etc. Furthermore, each individual log drum hosts multiple timbres dependent upon the location of the strikes. These physical instruments have been synthesized and combined with a deep bass sound to create the log drum heard in Amapiano. To an untrained ear, the log drum could be mistaken for an 808, which are also used in some Amapiano, but 808s are a more sustained sub-bass sound whereas Amapiano sounds more like a wood percussion with a much faster decay.

²⁵ There are other percussion instruments not listed because they are difficult to make out in the video.

Fiki speaks to this as the core of the genre saying “even my fellow music lovers, my friends, they also appreciate solid instrumentation for sure. We just ignore the lyrics sometimes it’s just like ‘screw the lyrics we just want to hear the drums man you know we just want to hear that bass line that’s real a good bass line.’ A good bass line and a good drum pattern you have a great song regardless.”

The House influence in Amapiano can be seen in the form, which is cyclical in nature, and uses short chord progressions and rhythmic ideas that are repeated. This buildable repetition elicits intrigue and momentum through the addition, subtraction, and variation on these short ideas largely through the alteration of instrumental layering. These commonalities make for naturally seamless transitions for DJs to segue from one song to the next song without disrupting the flow, while the layering of multiple melodic and percussive instruments combined with their calculated, yet improvisatory deviations hypnotically maintain audience engagement.

Viral Amapiano songs are usually packaged with a dance trend that partygoers would familiarize themselves with to participate. The dances to Amapiano music have origins in Zulu traditional dances (BBC Radio 1Xtra 2022). Overall, the purpose of Amapiano is danceability. Lyrical themes are typically centered around lust, party lifestyle, or are sometimes nonsensical for the purpose of supporting the rhythmic idea (Papercutt Studios 2019). Fiki said:

When you actually sit down and read the lyrics or you take time to think about them, you’re like, “this is a whole bunch of nonsense.” There's currently a song now circulating on TikTok where the person singing is literally just counting up and it’s just like “how is this a song like how is this a song?” But everything

surrounding it: how he delivers the counting and then the instruments around it, you want to dance to it... just like “hey man I don’t care.” If you play this in the right space at the right time, this thing is a bop.

The music videos mirror this, being frequently set in a club setting with darker lighting and numerous dancers in nightlife outfits doing the same choreographed dance in Amapiano style.

Fiki mentions that there are subgenres of Amapiano that have meaningful lyricism. “So that’s on the commercial side. But the deeper side of Amapiano, like the Private School Amapiano, I think a lot of people do give credit to the songwriting, the lyrics, ‘cause there’s some songs that are very, very beautifully written. They speak on real things, they speak on heartfelt things, you know, stuff like love, loss, and all that stuff.” As we will explore in this chapter, lyrical intentionality is an aspect that Malawians value in music – an aspect reflected in the selection of Amapiano subgenres with which Malawian musicians engage.

Subgenres

Amapiano, being a newer genre, has evolved and continues to evolve rapidly, giving birth to new subgenres and subgenres of those subgenres. Some notable ones are Private School, Quantum, Sgija, Bacardi, and Soulful. Private School leans heavily towards Deep House and is softer than other Amapiano subgenres. The break beats are removed, and it features long melodic solos from live instruments such as saxophone, lending itself to the improvisatory soloing of Jazz. Quantum is opposite Private School, with 808s, log drum, and bass layered to create an overwhelming bass core. This genre

was named after the minivans that are commonly used as public transport in South Africa, the Toyota Quantum, which are often souped-up with subwoofers. Sgija is purely instrumental and highly experimental, therefore it is difficult to define because its bounds are always being pushed. Bacardi is the most exported of the subgenres. It comes from the township of Pretoria and is derived from local house. It features the snare in addition to the log drum, and many dance trends originate from Bacardi. Finally, there is Soulful Amapiano, a subgenre that relies on jazz chord progressions, a softer log drum, and more thematic melodic content. It is the only subgenre from South Africa that spotlights the human voice. Finally, there is a hybridized genre, Afropiano: a combination of Afrobeats and Amapiano. This subgenre is the one with the most international participation and is continuously evolving with innovations from around the globe, as is seen in Malawi (MJ Wemoto 2023).

Success

What once was played in the streets of South African townships, is presently an internationally recognized and celebrated genre. DJs are at the helm of Amapiano, as they are oftentimes also the artist and producer. Their music circulated through their live sets and word of mouth; however, the main impetus for success was social media. Tik Tok exported Amapiano to across African, European, and North American music markets in the form of dance trends that expanded the genre through reposts and recreations, leading some Amapiano music videos to rack up tens of millions of views; *Wadibusa* by Uncle Waffles and Royal Musiq has 53 million views, *Biri Marung* by Mr Pilato, Ego Slimflow, and Tebogo G Mashego has drawn 56 million, and *Kabza De Small* and

Mthunzi's *Imithandazo* has amassed 77 million.

Amapiano artists are also receiving local, continental, and international awards. The Artist Sha Sha brought the genre to global prominence by winning the Viewer's Choice: Best New International Act award at the BET Awards in 2020 (BBC News Africa 2022). For her songs *Water* and *PUSH 2 START*, the singer Tyla has been nominated for, and won, two Grammy Awards ("Tyla Grammy Awards and Nominations, Song & Bio" 2026). In the genre's birthplace of South Africa, Amapiano has grown so integral to the music industry that it enjoys its own dedicated awards show, the South African Amapiano Music Awards, which has been hosted annually since 2021 (Team 2021).

Commercialization, International Adoption, and Hybridization

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the *Black Panther 2: Wakanda Forever* soundtrack was almost entirely Afrobeats and Amapiano artists, which was a shift from the prequel's soundtrack that featured mostly artists from the United States. The inclusion of South African Amapiano artists such as DBN Gogo, Sino Msolos, Kamo Mphela, Young Stunna, and Busiswa was a major breakthrough in international recognition for the genre.

The global success and longevity of the genre have been in part due to its commercialization and ongoing hybridization. Arguably the most well-known Amapiano song with 389 million views on YouTube is Tyla's 2023 hit, *Water*. This song was paired with a viral dance trend, taking on a life of its own on social media platforms and exposing new listeners to the genre. However, while the song leans towards the Bacardi

subgenre of Amapiano, it is fused with Afropop and RNB: a commercialized version of the genre, with a more watered-down²⁶ log drum and Western-Pop contoured vocal melody, making it a hybrid genre called Afropiano.

As Amapiano has acquired international popularity, artists from other African and Western countries have dipped their toes into Amapiano, oftentimes incorporating the log drum into their pre-existing sound, further hybridizing the genre. Bongopiano in Tanzania combines the log drum, shaker, and synths of Amapiano with the vocalistic style and melodic tendencies of an already established local genre called Bongo Flava. Bique is another subgenre of Amapiano from Mozambique that leans heavily on the percussive trance of House with noticeable jazz influence in the simple piano melodies, featuring a rugged and bass-y log-drum that sounds as though it is combined with an 808.

Afropiano

The most eminent subgenre is a cross-continental composite of Nigerian Afrobeats with South African Amapiano called Afropiano, which can take on flavors of RNB, Pop, or other fusions, first established by Afrobeats artists such as Burna Boy, Davido, Wizkid, and many others who seamlessly fuse the two genres. It is a hybrid genre undergoing active development across the globe, including Malawi. This is important because it shows how Amapiano travels by being localized. These two genres were respectively and separately formed from the fusion of numerous global and local influences and share the overarching goal of enjoyment and “vibing,”²⁷ making their

²⁶ Pun not intended.

²⁷ Gen Z slang term that is used both as a verb (to vibe/vibing), a noun (vibe), and an adjective (vibe/vibey). Coming from the word vibration, it is used to describe an intangible atmospheric frequency of a person,

hybridity a fertile foundation for seemingly limitless outcomes with a diverse sonic vocabulary to source from.

Afropiano is exceptionally customizable: it can mix and match common forms, instrumentation, melodic treatment, rhythmic staples, and chordal progressions found in both genres. This blending of distinct genres has created further subgenres. For example, if Afropop is the color blue, Amapiano is red, and RNB is white, they are mixed by artists with different ratios to create unique shades of purple with varying saturations, temperatures, and values.

Another analogy that is helpful for understanding the different blending possibilities of Afrobeats and Amapiano is the phenomenon of ecotones. In ecology, the space where different ecosystems overlap is called an Ecotone. This can occur in four ways (see Figure 23).

- “1 – A defined boundary, such as an agricultural field next to a woodland.
- 2 – A meandering ecotone, much larger in total edge length, such as a ragged coastline.
- 3 – Ecotones with incursions of each habitat into the other.
- 4 – A gradual transition ecotone, where each habitat blends into the other, and it’s not possible to define a clear edge” (Geraghty 2022).

The highest biodiversity exists in the space of convergence; a concept called The Edge Effect. The same can be said for the hybridity of musical genres, where diversity is found at the junction between two genres.

place, thing, or environment/setting. Vibing or describing something as “a vibe” or “vibey” has a positive connotation. Asking someone “what’s the vibe?” is meant to scope out the “energy.” Vibing is the act of being in the energetic environment.

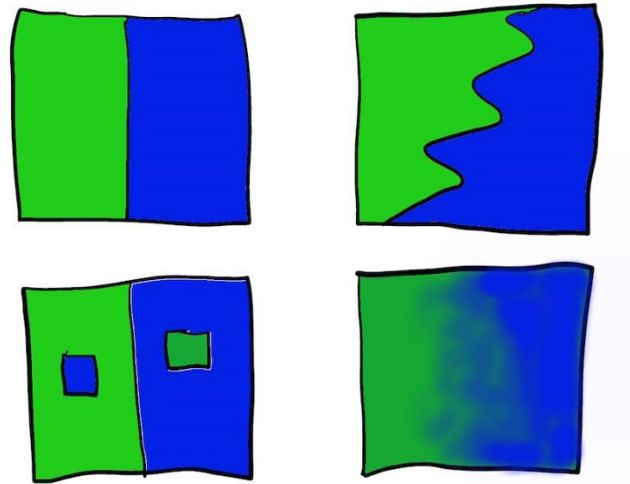


Fig 23: Ecotone Types.

We see this happening in the musical environment with the fusion of the Afrobeats and Amapiano: Afropiano.

The distinguishing factor of Afropiano required for it to be considered a hybrid of Amapiano is the log drum. In my extensive and daily listening since 2021 of Afrobeats, Amapiano, and Afropiano music on Spotify, I have found that the contribution of Afrobeats to the genre is the emphasis on melodic and lyrical content, combined with Pop-leaning rather than cyclical House chords and form. Many Nigerian Afrobeats artists are keeping their regular format but with the addition of the log drum. Of course there are various ways to blend the genres, some of which are still being discovered.²⁸ This hybrid genre has skyrocketed in popularity to the point where one will hear Afropiano as often if

²⁸ Nigeria and South Africa are debating the origin of the log drum, and what sounds belong to who in terms of royalties (Madichie 2026).

not more often than its parent genres. Perhaps the popularity can be attributed to the balanced blend of the danceability of Amapiano combined with the singability of Afrobeats.

In the U.S., some artists have taken interest in Afropiano, such as Chris Brown, who appeared on songs such as the remix of Lojay's *Monalisa*. Amapiano is also big in the UK, with artists such as Juls and Major Lazer infusing the log drum into their sound. This both demonstrates commercial adoption and the global flattening of the log drum into a sonic marker for the genre and its developing subgenres.

Afrobeats and Amapiano are both genres conjured from the fusion of international and local cross-cultural exchanges, and their ongoing innovative blending by musicians from different countries and continents enables infinite possibilities yet to be conceptualized; and Malawian musicians are mixing their own flavor of Afropiano, to be uncovered throughout this chapter.

The spread of global adoption and adaptation of Amapiano is indicative of its international acceptance and longevity. Malawi as a country may not host the same notoriety, economic advantage, or duration of time spent with unmonitored artistic freedom as the Western world or some other countries within the African continent, but Malawian musicians are producing Amapiano music that contends with that of the rest of the world in terms of quality. The Malawian musical environment is being shaped by the adoption of this popular genre and in turn, adapted it to fit the nation's musical framework and fill creative niches, thus contributing to both nationally and transnationally to the musical cultural exchange unfolding from Amapiano.

Amapiano in Malawi

Regional Exchanges: Past and Present

The inception of Amapiano was not in Malawi, but South Africa. Similarly to Nigeria, South Africa is a cultural hub in the continent, exporting fashion, music, film, and other forms of art to nearby countries, including Malawi. There's a long history of cultural mobility and specifically, musical trends traveling throughout Southern Africa which breeds the blending of genres adopted and adapted across borders. These preestablished pathways for musical exchange inaugurated Malawi's acceptance of Amapiano as a genre worth absorbing.

Jeremiah made note of a regional cross-cultural network. He said, "Southern Africa tends to have uniform music styles or music phases. Let's say whatever is big in Zambia is going to end up being big in Malawi and then slipping its way [through] to Uganda and even possibly South Africa. Whatever is like trending in South Africa also blends its way throughout most of Southern Africa." This regional mobility of musics throughout Southern Africa is contextualized by Lwanda in *Making Music in Malawi* (2021) and "The History of Popular Music in Malawi, 1891 to 2007: A Preliminary Communication" (2008).

South Africa's cultural foothold in Malawi is in part consequential of South Africa's comparatively improved economic stability. Jeremiah explained the imbalance: "we have a lot of people who want to migrate to South Africa to get better jobs. And they feel like if they went there, they dated the women, indulged in the culture, then things would just be better." He said this is "why people idolize South Africa. For example, now, the average minimum wage for a Malawian worker is like about \$30 to \$40 a

month. But if they could go to South Africa, they could earn maybe 500 to 700 EUR per month.” He attributes the attention Malawians pay to South Africa’s entertainment flow to this economic imbalance.

So that meant that their movies [and] their music penetrated more our markets than anything else. For example, we have these satellite dishes called DSTV from South Africa that every family wanted to have because it was a sign that you’re doing well, that you’ve accomplished something. That also meant that we received a lot of South African entertainment, movies. So, we sort of idolized South Africa as, you know, like the promised land. South Africa is a promised land for a lot of like Southern, for any country within Southern Africa.

Malawians consuming and engaging with South African media is a signifier of status or aspirational status as well as an appreciation for the craft. Musical mobility and cultural exchange, particularly within the region of Southern Africa, have played a significant role in the development of new musical traditions through the process of genre interaction and sonic evolution. The mobility of culture is attached to the migration of its people and the region of Southern Africa, called Maravi, that includes Malawi as well as “significant chunks of present-day Mozambique and modern Zambia” dating before 1200. Originally inhabited by Batwa, throughout the centuries Maravi slowly became home to settling Tribes (mostly Bantu) from the Congo/Zaire basin and the surrounding areas of the region (for example, the Lomwe came to Malawi from Southern Mozambique in the late 19th century to early 20th century) effectively replacing the Batwa with a range of ethnic groups (Lwanda 2021). Furthermore, for education and job opportunities Malawians have for over a century emigrated to countries nearby such as

South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia, taking their music with them and bringing new musics back, and experimenting. Artists such as George Phiri had influences from his Malawian heritage as well as Zimbabwean and South African cultures through emigration (Lwanda 2008, 2021). The Kwela genre was created “through the meeting of Malawian migrant workers music and South African Jazz.” Malawian Reggae was exported to “Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zambia, Mozambique, and Tanzania” (Lwanda 2021). From South Africa specifically, instruments such as the guitar along with styles such as the *isicathamiya* and *mbaqanga* became integrated into Malawian music (Schmidt 1994). The more developed recording industry in South Africa introduced new musics thereby influencing the musical ecosystem of surrounding countries in the region (Lwanda and Kanjo 2013). Kwaito was one of the most recent genre imports from South Africa, (Lwanda 2021) whose popularity set the stage for the acceptance of Amapiano. These are only a few examples of musical trading and mixing in the region of Southern Africa.

These cross-border interactions beget musical adaptations. The process I have been referring to as alliance-building, Mquzama describes as “there's this cloud of Pan-Africanism that we all dabbled in and out of as time progresses, and I think music is one of the aspects of that. I think we listen to South African music and there are aspects of that music that you can understand.” He identifies these points of relatability as “Bantu languages are pretty similar, so you can get some aspects of that [and] you can get similar melodies.” I imagine the phonetics of languages from the Bantu family would melodically contour in the similar fashions. Mquzama says that this trading within the region “does kind of connect you to that group of people in a way. Of course, it's not as

visceral or as intense or maybe feels [as] direct, but then like I think on a subconscious level.”

Consciously or subconsciously, Southern African Amapiano permeated the borders of present-day Malawi, where is undergoing the gradual process of intertribalism.

Adoption

The recency of this genre and its foreign interactions, the only way to know when, how, why, and where Amapiano engulfed the Malawian musical climate is through my interlocutors and clues from the music itself. As for when my interlocutors started noticing Amapiano in Malawi, I received a range of answers from 2021-2023 (the year I was there). Similarly to the modality through which Afrobeats spread in Malawi, Nholva noticed the genre “pop up around the African continent because it hits the radios, the TVs. Most TV programs, I think, the paid TV programs are mostly operated from South Africa, so it only makes sense, right?” Mquzama said it circulated “I think [on] TV, streaming platforms, radio for sure; bars are a big musical space. If the music stays in pubs, I think that’s one of the ways you can get music across that’s how you know is popular.” Connie added that live concerts are another way people become introduced. Mquzama implied that it was bound to become popular in Malawi because “It has very good dance rhythms. I think the beats are very African. But then I also just think it’s music that’s popular on the continent. Everything that’s popular on the continent usually finds its way here.”

Every one of my interlocutors believes Zeze Kingston has something to do with

Malawian's adoption of Amapiano. Like many other Malawian artists, he got his start in Hip hop and was one of the first to transition to Amapiano. Connie thinks the genre's popularity is because of nightlife culture, saying "it's mostly in gatherings...it's a communal thing." She also mentions that the genre, similar to Hip hop, is a voice for the youth, saying "young artists [such as Zeze] kind of adopted [Amapiano] to fit with that lifestyle of young people. It's mostly targeting young people." Given that Zeze, an already established artist, transitioned from Hip hop to Amapiano, it would make sense that his fan following would accept the genre as another outlet of youth expression. As someone who was in Malawi in 2023 when Amapiano was really gaining its footing, I can attest that it has taken over the music industry there. Eunice said:

At the moment, I would say they [Amapiano artists] have been taking over because Amapiano is even surpassing how Afrobeats is being used. Like most artists are now kind of leaving Afrobeats and now focusing on Amapiano. They're using the whole Afrobeats to be a big part of that music industry and then just having Amapiano taking over the whole industry like that. Like most artists are just going into that genre. That's what they do.

What she is describing is what nearly all of my interlocutors described as artists "riding the wave" of popularity, including Nholva who said "Everybody's just riding the waves at the moment. They have seen what people like and they're trying their best to like be a part of it."

The motive for this MacDonald thinks is "largely because of the financial gains, since Amapiano, it's something that has gotten traction a lot here, so artists have seen that that this type of music is attracting a lot of people and it has now become like a

moneymaking machine. It's something they can use to bring to bring in large numbers in concerts." Eunice echoed this saying the reason artists latch onto the genre is "it's one way a person can [get] in money faster because people want to listen to it, to listen to it [equals] more streaming." However, some of my interlocutors think Amapiano's resonance with Malawian communities is for reasons more than financial. Kate says that artists intentionally choose Amapiano because "they're free to express themselves through Amapiano. So, I think it's more so them just being authentically drawn to their Amapiano genre than Hip hop and the rest of their genres."

Mquzama sees some nuance in the adoption of Amapiano:

There's a trend aspect to it because we do tend to go with the trend in a way. So, for example, the time where Congolese music was popping, we listened to a lot of Congolese music. The time when Zambian music was popping, we listened to a lot of Zambian music. Now when Amapiano is popping, we'll play a lot of Amapiano music. So, I do think there is a trend aspect to it.

However, he also sees the agency in resonating with musical trends:

But then I also think by its very nature, almost all types of African music resonate with Malawians just by the sheer fact that we do share some cultural elements, the way we like our music to sound, I feel like it's very similar. And it's this, and the music is always this party type of music. This music is supposed to make you feel good. I think growing up, I think there are aspects of that music that were infused in our everyday lives.

He says the shared cultural elements manifest as "all of this kind of comes together in these music genres of like either Afrobeats or Amapiano. We do listen to a lot

of other African music in the musical channels that we share, the radio stations that we share. So, I think that also in a way kind of wishes this on to us in a way from just simply a proximity point of view, that the more we listen to this music, the more we tend to like it,” ultimately citing repeated exposure as having a role in the adoption of genres.

Success

Similarly to Afrobeats, Amapiano has proved itself as a successful genre for Malawian musicians, if we are referring to success in a quantifiable manner and has settled its position firmly in current Malawian music engagement. Mquzama noticed that “I think younger and younger artists are becoming prominent, it’s a good thing. There’s been more viewership of music in Malawi lately, a lot more YouTube views are coming their way, which is very good. A lot more shows by upcoming artists, which is something I really like.”

Malawian artists are gaining global recognition through award-recognition as well as increased views on YouTube and streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple music more than previously seen in other popular genres. While this can in part be attributed to the popularity of the genre itself, other factors to consider are the increased access to technology needed to make music in these genres, the improved quality in video and music production, the accessibility in that musicians do not need to learn an instrument to create this music, artist’s visibility on social media, the shift from physical to digital music contributing to ease and reach of distribution, among other things. Correlation does not equal causation, and I am not claiming that Malawian musicians have seen the highest level of success in views and streams simply because of the genre,

but it should be noted as part of the whole. In part this is because the genre is propelled by and for the youth, which correspondingly is the most substantial population in Malawi. Connie notes that genres such as Gospel are “mostly targeting [the] older population” whereas Kate says Amapiano is “mostly the young people...the youth. I think it’s because it’s trendy. They’re trendy beats for trendy vibes.”

Awards

The recognition of Malawian Afrobeats and Afropiano artists on national, regional, and continental levels is evidence of the genre’s overall popularity, the growing presence of Malawian music in the broader musical conversation, the increase in positive reception towards female solo artists, and intertribalism given that the artists awarded come from different backgrounds, yet all represent Malawi.

Two Afropiano artists took home major awards in the 2023 Malawian MASO Awards, with Zeze Kingston as Best Male Artist of the Year and Temwah winning Best Female Artist of the Year (“Four Maso Awards Winners Nominated for AFRIMA Awards, Biggest Continental Awards,” n.d.). In the 2024 MASO music awards, Zeze Kingston won Best Male Artist of the Year and Best Live Act. Temwah won Best Female Artist of the Year. Trappybeats. and Cizzle won Duo of the Year and Best Collaboration for *Cardio* (cfeditoren 2024). Amapiano artist Joe Ikon won Best New Artist in the male category as well as Best Stage/Live Performance at the 2025 MASO music awards (MASO Music Awards 2025 in Malawi 2025). Joe Ikon was also awarded Best Amapiano Act at the UMP 2025 awards. Jetu brought home Best Female Artist of the

Year also at the UMP 2025 awards (“UMP Awards Decorates MBC Presenters – Malawi Broadcasting Corporation,” n.d.). Out of the artists mentioned, only Joe Ikon, Jetu, and another artist mentioned later, Ajuh Guffi, can be considered purely Amapiano artists; the rest are Afropiano.

Malawian Amapiano artists are also making waves continentally. In the 2024 Zambian Zikomo Africa Awards, Temwah won yet another award: Rising Star of the Year (Banda 2024b) and 2025 Best Artist (Itai 2025b). For the 2025 AFRIMA awards held in South Africa Zeze Kingston was nominated for Best Male Artist in Southern Africa among big names such as Jay Prazah and one of the founders credited for the genre itself, Kabza de Small. Temwah was nominated for Best Female Artist in Southern Africa alongside Amapiano icons such as Uncle Waffles and Tyla (*UMP Music Awards 2025* 2025). Though none of the four Malawian artists took awards home in 2025, the recognition is significant for the growth of the Malawian music industry.

It should be noted that DJs who play Amapiano are also winning awards, though in Malawi, the focus is more on the artist whereas in South Africa, the DJs tend to get more notoriety. This is likely due to the long-established clubbing culture in South Africa wherein going out becomes a lifestyle to a degree not seen in Malawi. Where clubbing is a culture, there is more demand for and therefore supply of DJs. For smaller Malawian clubs, DJs may be seen as an unnecessary expense when a curated playlist can suffice. Another reason could be the preference for the more melody-centered Malawian Amapiano and Afropiano that values vocal talent above all else. Malawian Amapiano and Afropiano artists are marketed as solo performers the same as Afrobeats artists, so their public appearances in a concert setting would be live singing rather than DJ sets.

Views and Cross-Border Collaborations

Some popular Amapiano artists and their most viewed YouTube videos to provide a general scope are Zeze Kingston (a collab with Zambian artist Yo Maps featuring Botswanan producer HarryCane and Malawi's Leumas, *Nidlira Mumvula* with over 7.5 million views, posted March 6, 2026), Joe ikon (*Pang'ono* with 3.3 million views posted October 3, 2025), Temwah (a collab with Theresa Phondo, *YESU WANGA (Suyo)* with nearly 2 million views posted July 8, 2024), Fada Moti (*Kutali* with 4.4 million views posted September 6, 2024), and Afana Ceez (*Sikoyamba* with 1.6 million views, posted July 31, 2025), Trappybeats. (a collab with Hope Cizzle, *Cardio* with 2.3 million views posted October 4, 2024), Ajuh Guffi (*Chedwa* with 3 million views posted May 1, 2025), and Jetu (*Chakwaza* with 3.6 million views posted April 28, 2024). This list, of course, is not exhaustive, as new Amapiano artists continuously emerge, and several artists are trying out fusion genres such as Afropiano.

Malawian Amapiano is still fresh on the scene, but artists have already collaborated with others outside the nation. Temwah collaborated with South African artist Tuksin on her song, *Tumeni*. Zeze Kingston has collaborated with South African musician Xduppy on a handful of songs, as well as famous Zambian artist, Yo Maps and Botswanan producer, artist, and DJ, HarryCane. Janta collaborated with Zimbabwean artist, Roki, and South African artist, Mr. Brown.

These collaborations aid in attracting listeners from the collaborating artists' countries which in turn legitimizes Malawi's place in the cross-cultural Amapiano conversation and reinforces the genre's place within Malawi. Musical cross-border collaborations foster alliance-building in the region of Southern Africa and encapsulate

the spirit of community at the heart of Amapiano. Amapiano has legitimized its place in Malawian music through national and continental award recognition, audience engagement in millions of views and streams, and cross-border collaborations, which validate the effort of Malawian artists engaging with and localizing the genre in an intertribal way.

Intertribalism in Malawian Amapiano

Like Afrobeats, Amapiano is also a seemingly neutral territory, unbound by previous ethnic group claims, wherein a shared “Malawian” intertribal identity can be created. Simultaneously, this created intertribal identity contributes to the wider context of a global musical conversation through cross-border cultural exchange, blurring ethnic and national identities.

The question that kept coming up in my research was: Are Malawian musicians merely copying South African Amapiano, or is there something more brewing in the undercurrent? Whether or not there is a distinct “Malawian” or intertribal identity expressed in Amapiano is up for debate. When asked what makes Malawian Afrobeats distinguishable, many of my interlocutors struggled to find an answer. There were mixed opinions, but with many claiming that there is little to no sonic distinction to make Malawian Amapiano unique or identifiable as Malawian.

My interlocutors had more reservations about Amapiano than Afrobeats. MacDonald’s opinion is that it is “misrepresentative of Malawi because most of the songs are created largely to rile people up, make them excited, make them dance. They don’t

really have the lyrical content that talks about how Malawi is at the moment. They just focused on one side of life: the enjoying life part.” He acknowledges that:

There are some South African [Ama]piano songs that make you actually think about life...the message that they’re bringing is something that is leading you to think of where you are. With most Malawian [Ama]piano, and this is the reason why I’m saying that I think most people are just riding the wave because people are into [Ama]piano music now. Most of the songs they’re writing are just to get the crowd riled up, that’s all. We literally copied how they do it outside and brought it in a Malawian context. We haven’t really changed it.

With the perceived intentionality in Malawian Amapiano missing, he goes on to say, “sometimes I feel like we forget easily about who we are.”

MacDonald recognizes the spread of Amapiano but his critique is that “at the end of the day, we still have to at least try to make it more Malawian and contextualize it a bit. Which we have failed to do.” He hopes and believes:

That day might come. I think we might revolutionize something. We might turn Afrobeats or this Amapiano thing to be to have an element of Malawian in it. We can change things. I’m just saying that at the moment, like right now, it’s not like that. Right now, we have literally just copied and pasted it. It’s not that I have anything against Amapiano. I do listen to Amapiano songs from South Africa, but my complaint has always been that our Amapiano just, it’s just copy and paste. It’s not our...it doesn’t have anything distinctive.

Eunice attributes this lack of distinction to “People have really dissolved their cultural things. They’re now conforming to the new, they want to have that new identity.

They don't want to cling to their cultural thing." Jeremiah agrees that "riding the trend wave" has contributed to the erasure of various Malawian cultures. He remembers:

These other genres, they've contributed a lot to like erasing what we are as Malawians. And then the problem is, when these things come in, like we've seen it several times. There was a phase, I remember when I was a kid, we had Zambian music come in. Yeah, we had Zambian music come in and then everybody wanted to like be a part of that. They joined the thing. The music, the lyrics, they wrote, the music they performed at that particular time was sort of Zambian. And then we had the Kwaito phase, and then we had the House phase. All these are important genres, but just because they were being hyped internationally, people were like, "okay, maybe we can also gain traction on an international base by bringing these genres in Malawi." And when these things come, they come with their own culture.

He elaborates saying that the relevance of Amapiano in Malawi "comes with the sense of Malawians wanting to move with the times, I should say. Malawian identity has been compromised, where Malawians don't really know who they are." Yet he acknowledges the potential positives of this adoption, stating "this new wave is sort of like a hopeful anthem that we're progressing because most Malawians are looking at themselves in the same vein as, let's say, South Africa or Zambia, despite like the economic hardships. So they're like, 'okay, if you can produce the same music, then basically we must be on the same level, right?' I would say that's what's happening." This indicates that Malawian musicians gain confidence in their ability to absorb and add to foreign musical genres.

Eunice acknowledges the nuance of Amapiano's adoption into Malawi and its influence on identity.

I could say we might be expressing something that is Malawian. I mean, we're singing it in our language. We're partly showing how things are in Malawi, but I still think it's just us riding the waves. I think we don't really have a new concept because some of these songs, you listen to them...and you listen to some of these South African Amapiano songs, you'd be like, "okay, this is basically the same concept only that this one was written by a Malawian and it's been shot in Malawi, they're showing Malawian places," but the concept is the same.

In contrast, others identified some distinguishing factors. Connie believes there to be something unique, stating "if you were to listen to Malawian music, you wouldn't necessarily just say that, oh, this is a copy paste from this, you know? You would see where it was inspired, but then you can also see that, okay, they've taken another different direction." She says the difference can be heard mostly in the lyrics and the unique Malawian sense of humor. Connie reminded me of a time when we were traveling all day on a public bus. The driver was particularly reckless, and with the windows rolled down, the vehicle became somewhat of a wind tunnel. One of the female passengers said to herself but loudly enough for others to hear "I won't be able to pay the driver...if he keeps going this fast, my money will fly out the window," to which we all laughed (me later than everyone else because Connie had to pause from laughing to translate). This is only one example, but the amount of laughter I shared with Connie and other friends during my stay showed me that humor is core to Malawian perspectives. There is a spirit of finding humor in the midst of hardships and a prioritization of enjoyment regardless of

one's circumstances. This humor is not always direct but is in some Amapiano songs, namely through creative metaphors and visual demonstrations of humor in music videos.

Mquzama alludes to Malawian music as an intertribal space in which through its unifying abilities, becomes "Malawian." He says:

I think it is certain that there is a unified perspective of what needs to be Malawian, which is like traditionally conservative. But I think there is another strata where it becomes not necessarily unified? For example, when it comes to marriages...I think when it comes to those other sub-aspects of culture... it splinters into what different groups think is the right way of doing things. Is that reflected in music? I don't think so. I think there is still a right voice in terms of what different Tribes consider Malawi in music. I think it's still a unified voice when it comes to that.

As for how this "Malawian" sound interacts with Amapiano, he says:

I think it's an evolutionary thing. If you can still have aspects of this music up to now, for example, from an artist, let's say Jetu, right? Jetu is an Amapiano artist, but she has still managed to put out this song, which I said you can't place in a lot of traditional music. So, in a way, it's not this or that; it's not this displacing that. Music is very fluid. And I think our traditional music and our ear for music like that is pretty stubborn. It's a pretty stubborn type of music that I think is gonna last for a while, I don't think it's gonna get erased. I do think it needs to be promoted more, but I don't think it's being erased, basically. It's probably just an evolution. It's going to get co-opted in some parts of music, some other genres...but I don't see it as being erased because music by its very nature changes, you know, and it's probably going to change a bit more as time goes on.

He describes this as a natural and national evolution tying in the interactions between the youth and the older generations:

I think it's just like a natural evolution and change of times, because we still do have Malawians who make music, maybe to inform people about the social aspects of life and things like that. So, I'll just say that it's just like an adaptation of how the times are moving. And also, when it comes to the lyric content, it's just basically centered on the young people, the youth, which sort of like is also rubbing off on the older generation just a little bit- to be fun and have fun and stuff like that. So, it's just a national evolution.

As made evident through my interlocutor's thoughts, the adoption of Amapiano into Malawi and its pronounced representation of the current music scene is controversial. It is a fresh genre, so it may sound to some like Malawians are imitating South African Amapiano styles, but through the gradual process of musical synthesis, Malawian musicians and the Amapiano genre may be negotiating identities. Notably, these factors that define Malawian Amapiano as "Malawian" align with the evidence of intertribalism, which is evident in language, thematic content, and videographic materials.

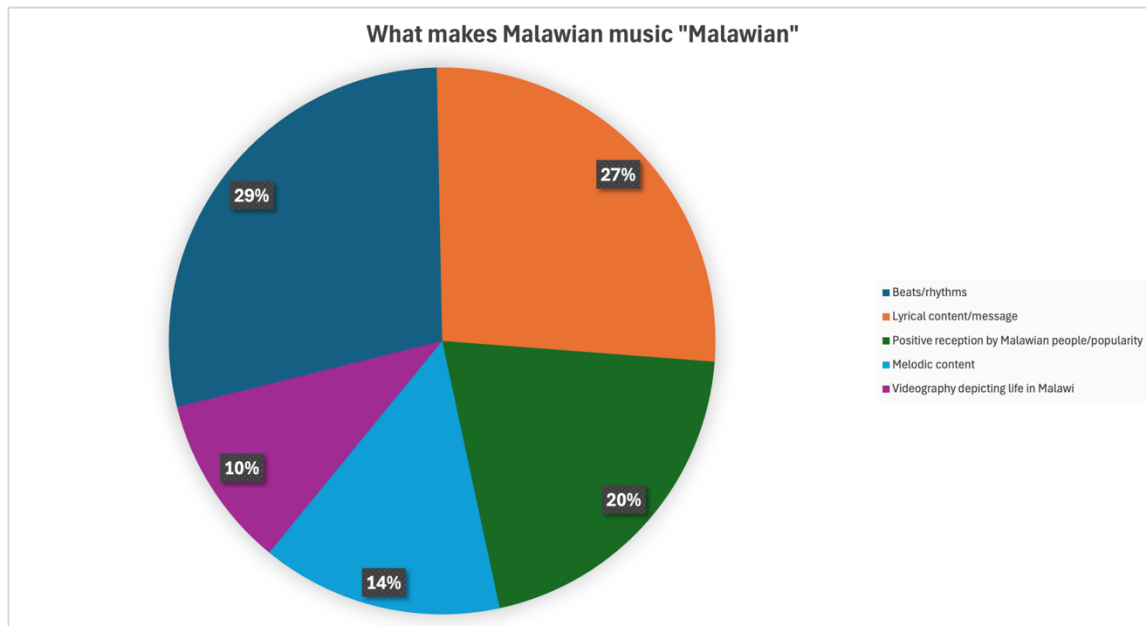


Fig 24: What makes Malawian music "Malawian."

According to survey participants, Malawian music is made “Malawian” through the rhythm (29%), the lyrical content (27%), and the positive reception by Malawians in general (20%). This is significant because while rhythms are considered the most identifying factor, lyrical messaging is weighted almost as importantly, showing that Malawian musical identities are rooted mostly in rhythm and lyrical themes, something that is reflected in the Afrobeats and Amapiano produced in Malawi. The positive reception of the music by the general population was not far behind, showing that many believe that music is Malawian if it is enjoyed by Malawians, an indicator of intertribalism. Finally, melodic content followed with 14% and videographic imagery depicting Malawian life with 10%, showing that while some viewed them as the most significant, the majority did not.

Intertribalism in Malawian Amapiano may not be immediately obvious upon first listen, but once examined more closely, it is demonstrated through the use of Chichewa,

the approach to dance, thematic content, videography, location, participatory musicking, and distinctly Malawian sonic qualities, often found in the hybrid genre Afropiano.

Malawian Amapiano and Afropiano also embodies hegemonic contestations through the presence of minoritized artists.

Language

Amapiano songs are traditionally sung in South African languages such as isiZulu or isiXhosa, and the preference for language seems to be the mother tongue of the artist without consideration to catering to a certain audience.

Like Afrobeats, the preference for Amapiano lyrics in Malawi is predominantly Chichewa. Kate said that the preference for Chichewa over English is because “the people that will listen to the songs, it will appeal more to like a large population, unlike the English version. Like even here, the artists that, Malawian artists that have their music in English at least listened to, unlike those that have their soul in Chichewa, because a lot of people are going to relate and understand,” a choice which skews intertribalism towards Chewa hegemony, but also demotes English as such.

Mquzama views “the sound itself” as part of Amapiano’s popularity in Malawi, but,

Also, the fact that the music is in Chichewa-Chichewa language. So, I think it excites a lot of Malawians to say, “okay, this music has a beat to it, but it also has the Malawian language.” It’s sort of like a pride for being that... they look at it as, “okay, this is ours, we own this,” you know? So that’s why you’ll hear a lot of new Amapiano Malawian music playing out in the clubs, out in the stores, out in general.

This shows that the use of an indigenous language shared by many Malawians across ethnic groups instills a sense of pride and collective identity.

Eunice notes that the language is not as significant in Amapiano as other genres because:

Amapiano is for party vibes. They don't get [a] really good message. Like mostly say, we're going to clubs, they play Amapiano from South Africa. We don't know anything. We don't understand anything, but we're still going to vibe. Because it's just the rhythm itself that is getting addressed, but then we don't know what the whole context of the music is.

Connie told me that Zambian music can be enjoyed fully because the languages are closely related, but the same cannot be said for South African music. "That's why Zambian music is so common, especially when you're singing to understand. But if it's just for the vibe, then okay, fine, South African music: House music and Amapiano."

However, as observed in Afrobeats, most popular songs in Malawi are sung in Chichewa, even by artists who do not belong to the Chewa ethnic group and whose mother tongue is another indigenous language. The overwhelming prevalence of Chichewa legitimizes the hegemonic domain of the Chewa yet provides a sense of intertribalism due to Chichewa being spoken by the majority of Malawi's population. English, the nation's official language, is also used, occasionally by itself, though infrequently compared to Chichewa, it is often interlaced within Chichewa-dominant lyrics, indicating a preference for Chichewa over English. The implementation of English opens Malawian music up to international audiences, while the apparent preference for

Chichewa preserves the intention of songs being by and for Malawians, with a perpetuated imbalance towards Chewa and Chichewa-speaking Malawians.

Amapiano has not seen the same degree of linguistic contestation in the form of artists singing in non-dominant indigenous languages as Afrobeats. This could be due to the relative newness of Amapiano in comparison, as from my observations, it seems that some artists within Malawi are more willing to take linguistic risks after securing some degree of success in terms of presence, views and streams, and live venue bookings. If Amapiano continues expanding the way it has, it is possible that artists will start incorporating indigenous languages other than Chichewa into Amapiano songs.

Mquzama sees the possibility for this because: “Amapiano, I see it very neutral. Afrobeats, there has been a very Northern swing to it. There’s some artists from the North that play it. And in the consumption of that, I have heard people complaining about the language...about people from the North singing the language and how people complain, that they don’t understand what things are.” It is a possibility that if Amapiano has increased longevity in the Malawian music scene that it could be a more “neutral” linguistic ground than Afrobeats.

Dance

Amapiano is an embodied music. Irrespective of the language used, the foundation of House in the Amapiano genre serves anyone who wants to dance, or as my friends and I put it “vibe.” Eunice speaks about how the rhythm possesses listeners, saying “some people say Amapiano is easily a catch when people listen to it. The rhythm itself takes people away and then people are easily taken away even if the message in the

music is not all that. But then the beat and the everything takes people away like it drives people crazy you know; in a good way...it just gives them the vibe on how they can start vibing with the people they have around.”

The emphasis on instrumentals with the voice serving as an additive component to the core of Amapiano, percussion, makes fluency in the language more a bonus than a necessity, opening its accessibility to all audiences. The origin, evolution, and application of the dances used in Amapiano would be another research project in itself. Without digging into a rabbit hole, it can easily be observed that the dances used in Malawian Amapiano and Afropiano music videos are generally simple to learn. For example, Zeze Kingston’s *Kusangalala* includes Malawians doing a dance that only involves arm movements in the chorus with a four-bar duration. The first three bars use three easily replicable moves with the first two bars being the exact same, and the third bar changing the third move. There is only one dance move in the fourth bar. During the log drum beat break, the dance move is pointing both hands synchronously alternating directions, a move commonly found in South African Amapiano. This sequence is accessible and would not take long for someone to learn. Short dance trends lower the barrier to participation across age, language, and tribal affiliation, thereby extending the participatory and intertribal capacity of the genre.

Thematic content

Lyrics in South African Amapiano often feature themes such as party life, lust, celebration, and enjoyment, or as Fiki pointed out, sometimes nonsensical. When I asked Kate about the themes of Amapiano, she said “I feel like for the music, it’s more centered

on life, living, having fun. I think that's mostly the lyrical content. Yeah, maybe talking about the socioeconomic situation, like in terms of like money, enjoyment." Connie supported this saying "if you think of Zeze, Zeze Kingston, it's not like...maybe some music that I don't know...but he's not singing about something so serious happening. It's just a vibe. Like, it's like targeting the young population at drinking places."

The lyrics are secondary to the rhythmic drive of Amapiano, and therefore, can be replaced by whichever topic resonates with artist and audience. Malawians demonstrate their cultural values by using South African Amapiano as a customizable template that they adapt to fit their musical environment. Like Afrobeats, the common topics which constitute intertribalism in Malawi are religion, romantic love, encouragement, and "waithood" (Lipenga 2023) which will be explored through examples of popular songs: *Yesu Wanga* by Temwah and Theresa Phondo, *Ku Tiyeni* by Praise Umali, Kell Kay, and Zeze Kingston, *Kusangalala* by Zeze Kingston, and *Chedwa* by Ajuh Guffi.

Religion

In Malawi, Gospel has been hybridized with nearly every foreign adopted genre and Amapiano is no exception. Malawian Gospel Amapiano tends to lean more towards the already hybridized Afropiano due to the emphasis of the melodic line and more conservative application of the log drum, making a genre one could label as Gospel Afropiano. One of Malawi's most famous Amapiano singers, Temwah, paired with one of the most famous female Afrogospel singers, Theresa Phondo, for the song *Yesu Wanga*, which is Chichewa for "my Jesus."

The Christian themes found in this song are similar to what would be found in any Gospel song, only the addition of the log drum makes this Amapiano. Chichewa lyrics depict the atonement (i.e. Jesus dying for the sins of humankind) with the lyrics:

“Wanditulutsa wandisambitsa ine

Wanditulutsa, wandisambitsa

Wandisambitsa!

Wandiyeresa wandikwezeka

Suyo Yesu wanga” which translates in English to:

“You freed me, you washed me

You freed me, you washed me

You made me clean

You raised me up

That’s the one, my Jesus”

With the deeply settled roots of Christianity in a mostly Christian nation, Gospel music becomes a point for connection regardless of ethnic background.

Temwah uses an isiZulu word “asambe” which means “let’s go,” meant to incite excitement. This linguistic choice directly pays homage to the genre’s mother country, South Africa, and perhaps is intended to draw in a South African audience in an instance of alliance-building.

<i>Yesu Wanga</i> by Temwah and Theresa Phondo	
Chichewa	English
“Yesu Wanga”	“My Jesus”
Temwah	Temwah
Hallelujah! x4	Hallelujah! x4
Ndinasangalala mmene ananena nane tiye	I was glad, when he [Jesus] said to me let’s go
Iwe tiye, iwe tiye, iwe tiye	Let’s go [with me] x3
Saona nkhope podalitsa munthu	He doesn’t have favorites when he is blessing people
Iwe tiye, iwe tiye, iwe tiye, iwe tiye	Let’s go [with me] x4
mphulupulu zako iwe zako	He doesn’t consider your mischiefs
Ndati tiye iwe tiye	Let’s Follow him, let’s Follow
Eeeeh!	Eeeeh!
Asambe, asambe, asambe (isiZulu)	Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go
Suyo oh oh oh	Isn’t that [Him]
Suyo oh oh (suyo Yahweh) (suyo Yesu yo)	Isn’t that Him (my Yaweh) (Isn’t that Jesus?)
Suyo oh oh	Isn’t that Him

Suyo Yesu wanga	Isn't that my Jesus?
Wanditulutsa wandisambitsa ine	He's freed me, he's washed me
Suyo oh oh oh	Isn't that Him?
Suyo oh oh (suyo Yahweh)	Isn't that Him (my Yaweh)
(suyo yesu yo)	(Isn't that Jesus?)
Suyo oh oh	Isn't that Him
Suyo Yesu wanga	Isn't that my Jesus?
Yesu wanga wandisamalira ine	My Jesus has taken care of me
Yesu wanga wondisamala	My Jesus who takes care of me
Suyo	Isn't that my Jesus?
Yesu wondisamala	Jesus my caretaker/protector
Suyo Yesu wanga	Isn't that my Jesus?
Wanditulutsa wandisambitsa ine	He's freed me, He's washed me
Wanditulutsa, wandisambitsa	He's freed me, He's washed me
Wandisambitsa!	He's washed me!
Wandiyereswa wandikwezeka	He has made me clean [holy], He has raised me
Suyo Yesu wanga	Isn't that my Jesus

Theresa Phondo	Theresa Phondo
Ndinasangalala,	I was very happy,
mmene anatchula dzina langa	when he called my name
Nati bwera bwera kuno mwamwana wanga	He said come to me, come to me my child
Zakale zapita, osakayika,	The past is gone, don't doubt it
Ndakusintha dzina	I have changed your name,
Ndakupatsa lina	I have given you a new one
Kuyambira lero ndiwe mwqna wanga!	Starting from today you are my child!
Yeah wandipuputa puputa	He has wiped my tears,
Puputa thukuta	Wiped my sweat
Yenda ndi confidence	Walked with confidence
Nsinga anadula	He has cut the string
Yesu wanga, Yesu wanga	My Jesus, My Jesus
Suyo!	Isn't that Him!
Temwah and Theresa	Temwah and Theresa
Asambe! Asambe! Asambe! (isiZulu)	Let's go, let's go let's go
Suyo oh oh oh	Isn't that Him
Suyo oh oh	Isn't that Him
(Yesu wanga)	My Yahweh
Suyo yesu wanga	That's the one, my Jesus
Yesu wanga wandisamalira ine	He's freed me, he's washed me

Yesu wanga wondisamala	My Jesus has taken care of me
Suyo	Isn't that Him
Yesu wondisamala	Jesus my caretaker/protector
Suyo Yesu wanga	Isn't that my Jesus?
Wanditulutsa wandisambitsa ine	He's freed me, He's washed me
Wanditulutsa, wandisambitsa	He's freed me, He's washed me
Wandisambitsa!	He's washed me!
Wandiyeresa wandikwezeka	He has made me clean [holy], He has raised me
Suyo Yesu wanga	Isn't that my Jesus

Romantic love

As discussed in the previous chapter, romantic love is one of if not the most common themes in modern Malawian musics. South African Amapiano tends to feature lust more than love, but as mentioned in the previous chapter, artists are inclined more towards spotlighting romantic love for cultural and religious reasons. The avoidance of singing about lust is itself intertribal because it is a collective stance. The Afropiano song, *Ku Tiyeni*, is a wedding song in English and Chichewa and is a collaboration of three major male artists: Praise Umali, Kell Kay, and Zeze Kingston.

The lyrics convey a serious and devoted love with the chorus enthusiastically requesting marriage.

“Ku tiyeni ankhoswe tiyeni

Ku tiyeni ku ukwati tiyeni”

“In marriage, let’s get engaged

Let's proceed with a wedding”

The confidence and loyalty of this love is portrayed with lyrics like:

“Unandiuza don’t rush

Akuti true love never runs out

Ndinakumvera Nkhani zima rumours

Osadziwa mwanakazi nakukhumba khumba

You belong to me

Eko sunga key” or in English:

“She told me not to rush

She said true love never runs out

I have heard a lot of rumors

But they don’t know I am really down for you

You belong to me

Keep the keys to my heart.”

This is only one example of a romantic Afropiano song. Typically, a “pure” or unhybridized Amapiano song explores themes more related to partying and lifestyle, but the Afropiano blend lends itself to romantic love.

<i>Ku Tiyeni</i> by Praise Umali, Kell Kay, Zeze Kingston	
Chichewa	English

“Ku Tiyeeni” Praise Umali Saw You Once Moving too fast already Would you meet my daddy? Can I see your family? Mtima iwe puma osapuma And I told my mommy I’ve found the one, she said “Mwakumana kuti?” Ku Tiyeeni takumana ku tiyeeni Nde tiye baby Ndine mpaka manda Girl I know that I love you right Long as I’m alive Koma anzanga akudabwa Why?	“Outside” Praise Umali Saw You Once Moving too fast already Would you meet my daddy? Can I see your family? My heart is skipping beats And I told my mommy I’ve found the one, she said “Where did you meet?” I told her we have met in my whereabouts Baby! You and I till the grave Girl I know that I will love you right As long as I am alive But my friends are surprised Why?
--	--

How you hold me down?	How do you hold me down
Nawo Akufunsa anthu	And they are asking
Akufunsa Mukathera kuti?	‘where are we ending up?’
Ku tiyeni ankhoswe tiyeni	In marriage, let’s get engaged
Ku tiyeni ku ukwati tiyeni	Let's proceed with a wedding
Ku tiyeni tikathera ku tiyeni	Let’s have it come to pass
Ku tiyeni ku ukwati tiyeni	Let's proceed with a wedding
Ku tiyeni tikathera ku tiyeni	Let’s have it come to pass
Zeze Kingston	Zeze Kingston
Aye Yo!	Aye Yo! (The artist’s slogan)
Tiyeni! Tiyeni! Tiyeni! Tiyeni! Eish!	Let’s go! x4 Eish!
Kell Kay	Kell Kay
You already know	You already know (the artist’s slogan)
Unandiuza don’t rush	She told me not to rush
Akuti true love never runs out	She said true love never runs out
Ndinakumvera Nkhani zima rumours	I have heard a lot of rumors
Osadziwa mwanakazi nakukhumba	But they don’t know I am really down for you
khumba	

You belong to me Eko sunga Key When I'm with you, I'm free With you is where I wanna be You belong to me Eko sunga Key When I'm with you, I'm free Koma anthu akudabwa Ati you hold me down Anzanga Akufunsa Nawo Akufunsa Tikathera Kuti? Ku Tiyeni ku Tiyeni Anthu Akufunsa Tikathera kuti? Ku Tiyeni Ku Tiyeni Praise and Kell Ku tiyeni tikathera ku Tiyeni Ku tiyeni Ku Ukwati Tiyeni Ku tiyeni tikathera ku Tiyeni Ku tiyeni Ku Ukwati Tiyeni	You belong to me Keep the keys to my heart When I am with you, I'm free With you is where I wanna be You belong to me! Keep the keys to my heart When I'm with you, I'm free And people are wondering How do you hold me down? My friends are asking, everybody is questioning me Where are we ending up? Outside (somewhere to have fun) People are asking Where are we ending up at? Outside, outside Praise and Kell To the wedding, We'll end at the wedding To the wedding, To the wedding, let's go To the wedding, We'll end at the wedding To the wedding, To the wedding, let's go
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Zeze Kingston	Zeze Kingston
Aye Yo!	Aye Yo! (The artist's slogan)
Tiyeni! Tiyeni! Tiyeni! Tiyeni! Eish!	Let's go! x4 Eish!
Ndiwe mbambande baby	You are a genius baby
Anthu onsewa akungodabwa	All these people are wondering where did
tinakumana kuti?	we meet?
Tinakumana kuti?	Where did we meet?
Ndiwe mbambande baby	You are a genius baby
Anthu onsewa akungofunsa kodi tiithera	All these people are asking where will we
kuti?	end up?
Kodi tiithera kuti?	Where will we end up?
Ku Tiyeni	Outside

Encouragement

As in Afrobeats, the theme of encouragement is also expressed in Amapiano. The acknowledgement of life's hardships and the offering of uplifting words through those hardships is something with which all people can resonate, but it is especially meaningful to Malawians coming from another Malawian in a local language.

“*Ndati masiku ako ovutika sangakhale onse dziwa*” translates to “But your bad days cannot be all days you have to know,” reminding the listener that everything is temporary and there are good moments yet to come.

The mantra-esque repetitiveness of the chorus almost hypnotically convinces the listener to believe in the message:

“*Zokhumudwitsa ndi zambiri*

Koma ine ndasankha kusangalala” or in English:

“There are a lot of disappointing moments

But I choose happiness.”

Jeremiah said that what makes Malawian music “Malawian” is “the lyrical content, because I’d say for me, what stands out from Malawi music is the essence of a shared struggle. And sometimes it can only be communicated through Chichewa or through, like, musical content, but it’s just this weird sense of being where someone who can write a song about the most obscure thing and you can be like, okay, I, you know, I resonate with it.” This shared struggle is what *Kusangalala* seeks to address through a positive perspective-shift.

<i>Kusangalala</i> by Zeze Kingston and Leumas	
Chichewa	English
“Kusangalala”	“Happiness”

Eyoh tiyeni	Hey all, let's go
Tiyeni tiyeni tiyeni eish	Let's go, let's go, let's go, eish
Una-na-na	Una-na-na
Una-na-na mmh	Una-na-na mmh
Una-na-na	Una-na-na
Una-na-na mmh	Una-na-na mmh
Pomwe ena akulira ena akuseka mmh	When other people are crying others are laughing
Pomwe ena akulira ena akusekelera	When some people are sad others are happy
Koma masiku ako osekera sangakhale onse dziwa	But know that all your days cannot be good days
Ndati masiku ako ovutika sangakhale onse dziwa	But your bad days cannot be all days you have to know
Zokhumudwitsa ndi zambiri	There are a lot of disappointing moments
Koma ine ndasankha kusangalala	But I choose happiness
Zokhumudwitsa ndi zambiri	There are a lot of disappointing moments
Koma ine ndasankha kusangalala	But I choose happiness
Zokhumudwitsa ndi zambiri	There are a lot of sad moments

Koma ine ndasankha kusangalala	But I choose happiness
Zokhumudwitsa ndi zambiri	There are a lot of disappointing moments
Koma ine ndasankha kusangalala	But I choose happiness
Olo ndidzilira!	Even if I start crying!
Ndilira mpaka liti?	How long will I cry for?
Ndidzidandaula!	No matter how I worry!
Ndidandaula mpaka liti?	How long will I worry for?
Olo ndidzilira!	Even if I start crying!
Ndilira mpaka liti?	How long will I cry for?
(ndilira mpaka liti)	(How long will I cry for?)
Olo ndidzidandaula!	No matter how I worry!
mmh mpaka liti?	How long will I worry for?
(ndidandaula mpaka liti)	(How long will I worry for?)
Poti mavuto samatha, mavuto samatha	Problems never end, problems never end
Mavuto samatha, mavuto samatha	Problems never end, problems never end
Mavuto samatha, mavuto samatha	Problems never end, problems never end
Mavuto samatha, mavuto samatha	Problems never end, problems never end
Zokhumudwitsa ndi zambiri	There are a lot of disappointing moments
Koma ine ndasankha kusangalala	But I choose happiness

Zokhumudwitsa ndi zambiri	There are a lot of disappointing moments
Koma ine ndasankha kusangalala	But I choose happiness
Zokhumudwitsa ndi zambiri	There are a lot of sad moments
Koma ine ndasankha kusangalala	But I choose happiness
Zokhumudwitsa ndi zambiri	There are a lot of disappointing moments
Koma ine ndasankha kusangalala	But I choose happiness
Kusangalala, kusangalala	Happiness, happiness
Kusangalala, kusangalala	Happiness, happiness
Kusangalala, kusangalala	Happiness, happiness

Waithood

Hip hop is still an active genre among the youth of Malawi used as an outlet to express aspirations, lifestyle choices, loyalties, and express “waithood” (Lipenga 2023). The most recently prevalent genre in the scene, Amapiano, is also a genre by and for the youth, and it too has become a vehicle to articulate the same sentiments of economic frustration experienced by dependent youth in an impoverished economy. Amapiano is a clubbing genre that lacks the political focus Hip hop possesses and favors groove over lyrical impact; however, “apolitical” genres can still funnel direct or indirect political messages, as is seen with “waithood” in Malawian Amapiano.

Though Ajuh Guffi is one of if not the youngest musician in Malawi’s music scene and has gotten a lot of traction on YouTube with his song *Chedwa*, which translates

in English to “to be late.” This song uses sarcasm to critique someone who has quality material items is in a better economic position than the singer through lines such as:

“Uli ndi phoni yabho aise, mwabheba

Mwabela mutachena, mukununkhila, mwabheba” which translates to:

“You have a nice phone friend, you’re lit

You’ve come dressed well, smelling nice

You’re lit”

“Lit” is slang for “cool” and is used sarcastically along with “friend,” implying that the singer does not actually believe the subject is either of those things. This speaks to the frustration many feel stemming from class differences.

Guffi identifies that he is unimpressed with the subject’s entitlement by singing:

“Mwakwela njale ya bho

Koma sizanu, n’zamakolo” or in English:

“You’re riding/driving a sweet car

But they’re not yours, they’re your parents”

He further alludes to the subject’s arrogance with:

“Zakwanu zomwezi mutiwalile

Zomwezi, mutitumbwile” which in English means:

“The same things from yours, you flaunt at us

[With] the same ones, you make us look bad”

With aspirations for a financially-sound future and a sense of pride that it is self-earned, Guffi promises that he will have four times as much as the subject in the future with the line:

“Nde mungodikila pangono

Nde ndigula 4X4” meaning,

“So just wait a little bit

Then I’ll by a 4x4.”

The overall sentiments of frustration and the determination to achieve a more stable future fall in line with Lipenga’s concept of “waithood” as a theme that resonates with the youth of Malawi irrespective of ethnic background.

<i>Chedwa</i> by Ajuh Guffi	
Chichewa	English
“Chedwa”	“To Be Late”
Mwabwela mutachena, mukununkhila, mwabheba	You’ve come dressed well, smelling nice You’re lit
Uli ndi phoni yabho aise, mwabheba	You have a nice phone friend, you’re lit
Mwabela mutachena, mukununkhila, mwabheba	You’ve come dressed well, smelling nice You’re lit
Uli ndi phoni yabho aise, mwabheba	You have a nice phone bro, you’re lit
Mwakwela njale ya bho	You’re riding/driving a sweet car
Koma sizanu, n’zamakolo	But they’re not yours, they’re your parents’
Mumauza phoni ya bho	You use a nice phone
Koma sizanu, n’zamakolo	But they’re not yours, they’re your parents’
Nde mungodikila pangono	So just wait a little bit

Nde ndigula 4X4	Then I'll by a 4x4
Nde mungodikila pangono	So just wait a little bit
Nde ndigula 4X4	Then I'll by a 4x4
M'mamawa chi tea cha mbatata	In the morning, tea with sweet potato
Masana chi nsima cha matemba	In the day, nsima with matemba [small fish]
Madzulo chi nsima chosala masana chi kuchidya, kuvaya kukagona	In the evening, eat the leftover nsima, then go to sleep
Kwanu m'mamawa ndi tea wa coffee	At yours, in the morning, coffee
Masana nsima ndi ndiwo ya nkhope	In the day, nsima with a side that has a face
Madzulo simudya kwambiri, m'makhala mwadya m'a 4 nkukagona	In the evening, you don't eat much, you happen to have eaten around 4 and go to sleep
Mukudalila zamakolo, zivekebwa	You're depending on your parents'[things]
Manyazi akugwileni	Shame should get you
Aise, mukuchedwa	Friend, you're running late
Mukudalila zamakolo, zivekebwa	You're depending on your parents'[things]
Manyazi akugwileni	Shame should get you
Aise mukuchedwa	Friend, you're running late

Zakwanu zomwezi mutiwalile	The same things from yours, you flaunt at us
Zomwezi, mutitumbwile	[With] the same ones, you make us look bad
Zakwannu zomwezi mutiwalile	The same things from yours, you flaunt at us
Zomwezi, mutitumbwile	[With] the same ones, you make us look bad
Nde mungodikila pangono	So just wait a little bit
Nde ndigula 4x4	Then I'll by a 4x4
Nde mungodikila pangono	So just wait a little bit
Nde ndigula 4x4	Then I'll by a 4x4
M'mamawa chi tea cha mbatata	In the morning, tea with sweet potato
Masana chi nsima cha matemba	In the day, nsima with matemba [small fish]
Madzulo chi nsima chosala masana chi	In the evening, eat the leftover nsima, then
kuchidya, kuvaya kukagona	go to sleep
Mukudalila zamakolo, zivekebwa	You're depending on your parents'[things]
Manyazi akugwileni	Shame should get you
Friend, mukuchedwa	Friend, you're running late
Mukudalila zamakolo, zivekebwa	You're depending on your parents'[things]
Manyazi akugwileni	Shame should get you
Aise, mukuchedwa	Friend, you're running late

Kate speaks on what listeners receive from messages such as these.

These genres impact people in a way more of like self-reflection, people being themselves and not what society expects them to be. So, I think that's mostly the message that goes out there to young people, to people who are listening to this music, but then at the same time, they'll also be like celebrating and enjoying themselves in the moment whilst also tipping on the message to say, "hey, you don't have to be like anyone else. You can just be yourself and people who are in tune with your vibe are going to vibe with you. And those that aren't just won't. So you should be okay with that."

Religious, romantic, encouraging and hopeful themes, and waithood are not new to Malawian music, but they are topics made intertribal through their relatability.

Amapiano and Afropiano are an apolitical²⁹ continuation of these uniting themes in Malawi's evolving modern musical ecosystem.

Sonic Differences

Within this musical ecotone of Afropiano, a new infusion and celebration of indigenous Malawian musics is found. As mentioned previously, there are hybridizations with indigenous sounds such as Tanzania's fusion of Bongo Flava and Amapiano: Bongopiano. In Malawi, there is not such a pattern recurrence that a new genre can be named, but indigenous Malawian sounds are actively being incorporated into modern genres through the gradual process of inculturation, indicating that Malawians may be

²⁹ Apolitical meaning political dissent is not a core feature of these genres.

creating a representation of an intertribal identity through the interactions of the Ecotone between tradition and modernity. Examples of this in Malawian Afropiano are *Mpaka M'manda* by Joe Ikon featuring Praise Umali, *Pangolin* by Jetu, *Ndiwelengere* by Oana featuring Loisa, and *Go Konko* by Emmie Deebo. Sonically, these songs are unlike Afropiano from other countries in that they merge sounds that are distinctly Malawian.

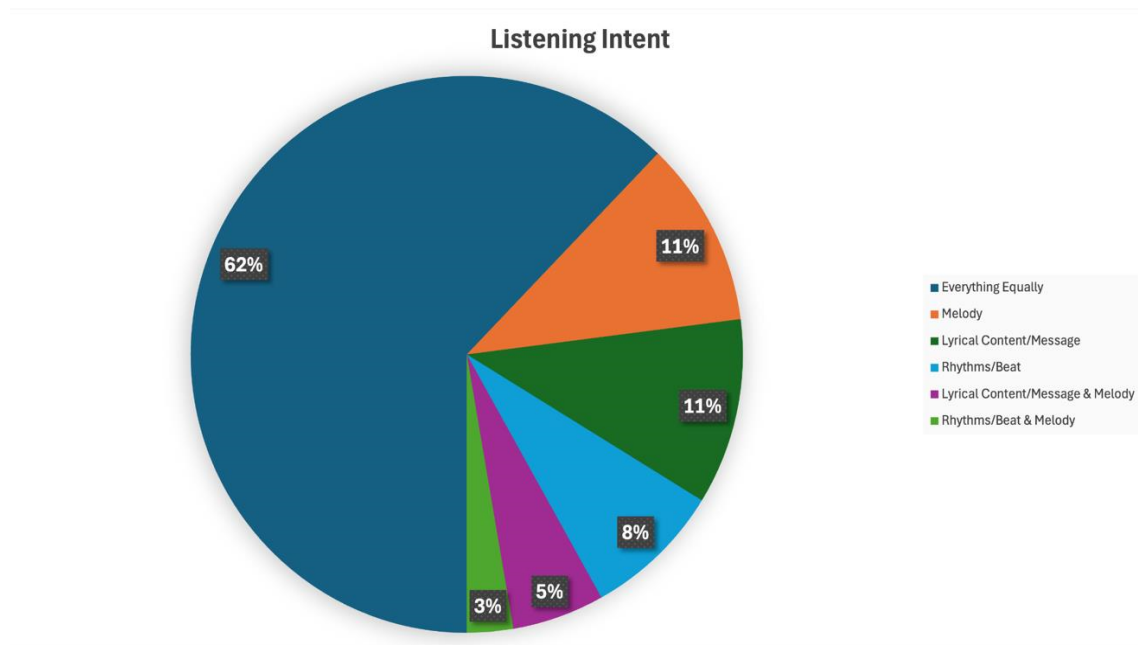


Fig 25: Listening Intent.

Though in Figure 24 the survey participants identified beats/rhythm (29%) and lyrical content (27%) as the main features that make Malawian music “Malawian,” the majority (62%) selected that when listening to music in general they listen to melody, lyrical content, and rhythms and beat equally. This equally distributed appreciation for all musical elements is perhaps the key to how Malawian music has been able to adopt and adapt so many foreign genres into its musical space.

When I asked my interlocutors what sonic aspects make Malawian Amapiano (such as the songs listed above) distinct from South African, they identified rhythmic interplay, reflecting the data from Figure 24.

Kate explained there is a difference in:

...the beat play in terms of how the beat has been put together. It's still the same sound as Amapiano, but they sort of own the way it sounds. Some songs have the same instrumental but have different content in terms of the language and everything. I think for Malawians, they sort of like do that. They change the beat play just like the way they produce it a little bit.

Eunice also agrees that the treatment of percussion and rhythm is different, but not out of preference, saying "it feels as if things that are international appear more appealing than things that are locally made, the music that we make here: local music. I doubt that most of the youths listen to the local music because everybody prefers internationally imported genres. I don't know what drums they use in South Africa, so it's kind of different. Then from here they try to copy some beats, but then it doesn't match with that South African vibe. I think the difference should be that." She goes on to hypothesize that the choice is "not intentional, but the thing is, there's that thing about copyright infringement. People run away from that. So, they're trying to make something out of something, but they don't want to get the whole part of it. So, they listen to that rhythm themselves. They try to make it their own."

Mquzama identified:

It's hard for a country to have a specific genre of music because music by its very nature, music does not respect borders. Music is very trans-border, or it transverses

time and space. But if I was told to mention what Malawian music identity is, it would be music that comes from traditional instruments. Apart from the music that's associated with specific cultures, which obviously would sound as Malawian, there is a distinct local genre of music with artists such as Moses Makawa.

Some "traditional" instruments and rhythms mentioned by my interlocutors already lean themselves to Amapiano: many song practices have the presence of shakers, syncopation and polyrhythms, multiple irregular solo drums that have the same function of a log drum (some of which can be used to pitch bend such as the *namalema* drum in Tchopa), cyclical forms, and are paired with dances (see Table 1).

Each of the songs listed earlier have some of these elements which deviate from South African Amapiano, indicating that Malawian Amapiano and Afropiano are undergoing syncretization through sonic experimentations and localization, thereby furthering a sense of intertribalism in shared sonics in ethnic group musical practices such as the use of multiple differently-pitched drums as seen in Table 1 or the guitar or banjo which have been well-integrated into the Malawian musical ecosystem since the era of opportunity-based migration across Southern Africa (homogeneity) as well as ethnic group-specific rhythms and dances demonstrated (heterogeneity). In many cases, the ethnicity of the artists does not align with the specific sonic features or song and dance traditions shown in their music videos; or the ethnicity of the artists is unknown altogether, furthering a sense of intertribalism in the unrestricted use of sonic and visual features.

For example, *Pangolin* by Jetu and *Go Konko* by Emmie Deebo both have the foundation of the *manganje* rhythm that is already made intertribal through its

implementation in ethnic group-specific musical practices (e.g. Vimbuza of the Tumbuka, Tchopa of the Lomwe, and Manganje of the Yao) and history of appropriation in other modern musics (Lwanda 2021). The routine use of this rhythm by many ethnic groups in ceremonial and commercial entertainment spaces make it a sonic index for intertribalism in Malawi.

Mquzama said:

For me, Pangolini [*Pangolin*] is what Malawian music sounds like, but modernized, right? She [Jetu] does a little Amapiano, but this Pangolini [*Pangolin*] song is very, it's not on Amapiano... the drum progression is a bit different. The beat is different. And for me, I think that is the traditional like, at least one of the traditional manifestations of music I hear and I'm like "oh yeah that's very Malawi."

Another alteration in Malawian Amapiano and Afropiano is the treatment of the log drum. Many Malawian Amapiano and Afropiano songs use log drums in a similar manner of (or arguably more conservatively than) the solo drum (many of which have pitch-bending capabilities) in a set of three-differently pitched drums is used in several indigenous musics.³⁰ Malawians use the log drum in a less "disruptive" manner than what can be experienced in South African Amapiano, and rather use it to assist the rhythmic flow with less pitch and rhythmic variation.

Go Konko and *Pangolin* are examples of this treatment. It almost sounds like they have digitally fused hand drums with the log drum, but we know it's a log drum and not a physical hand drum is the slightly longer sustain which I like to think of as a "twang," yet

³⁰ The variations of drums and their name variations are innumerable so I will be more general here to note commonalities.

it has an acoustic quality that rounds the expected log drum timbre. In Malawian Amapiano and Afropiano, the log drum is integrated with traditional pitched hand drums, electric bass, and sometimes a subtle 808 in such a way that it is difficult to aurally discern the interplay of percussive identities.

More on *Pangolin* in the ‘Song Analysis’ section of this chapter but *Go Konko*’s tempo marking of BPM=147 is significantly faster than a typical Amapiano song range of BPM=110-115 but is more characteristic of several Malawian musical traditions such as the Vimbuza, keeping in mind that they also center dance. Rhythmically, the percussion is interlocking and syncopated. The vocal line is more rhythmic than melodic, also syncopated and interlocking with a short pitch range. There are multiple voices that perform call-and-response with Emmie. There is a synth ostinato which sounds like strings. Ostinatos are characteristic of the genre but not with synth strings. Finally, there is briefly and faintly the sound of a wooden flute and an ulimba which keeps the pulse. The electric guitar performs a function more like an ulimba typically would, with a melodic ostinato sitting somewhere between the percussion and the vocals.

Ndiwelengere by Oana featuring Loisa also uses a triplet swung-feel rhythm that I would identify as the *manganje* rhythm, but with a slowed tempo (BPM=102) more to aid in the AfroRNB feel, made intriguing in that it is performed by a metal instrument which could be a cow-bell but is reminiscent of the handmade metal-on-metal instruments (such as kitchen utensils) that Malawians have used as percussion instruments in traditional musics such as Vimbuza. Many older Malawian instruments are handmade with whatever materials are accessible, especially in rural areas where pre-made instruments would be more difficult to acquire. This sonic decision contributes to the localized sound, with

added charm because this song does not fit it directly in the “pocket” of the beat, creating a laid-back atmosphere. It is the heart of the song because it is the first thing heard and is consistent throughout.

The triplet-feel rhythm is layered with a syncopated snare characteristic of Afrobeats (see Figure 14) (though it is soft and more clap-like) creating a relaxed polyrhythmic feel. There is also an unidentified hand drum that converses with the electric bass and the log drum. There are also three electric guitars: one more “wet” sounding guitar which continuously outlines the chord progressions with some rhythmic variation, an improvisatory “singing” melodic guitar, and a “plucky” guitar. There is call-and-response between Oana and the backup singers. Oana’s vocal techniques and melodic contouring are reminiscent of French Malian Afrobeats singer Aya Nakamura, which could be a coincidence or a stylistic choice showing the genre’s global reach. The global influences of Afrobeats, RNB, and Amapiano are all present and are sonically localized through the *manganje* rhythm through the slightly polyrhythmic off-centered cow-bell sound that mimics handmade metal elements, the importance of the guitar, subtle log drum, and call-and-response.

Mpaka M’manda by Joe ikon featuring Praise Umali reads as typical Amapiano with its BPM within the normal range (BPM=112), continuous use of the shaker, and a log drum more sonically adjacent to South Africa, but there are still some unique sonic aspects that give it an intertribal quality. The log drum is still round and warm compared to some South African songs, there is a wooden flute, vocal layering, call-and-response, the sparse but uplifting electric bass that blends with the lower percussion, and the

“plucky” electric guitar ostinato. No one of these features would point to this song being Malawian, but when together, they create an intertribal sound world. Sonics within the context of the theme declaring an undying love over lust or a party lifestyle (*mpaka m'manda* translates from Chichewa to English as “to the grave”), the use of Chichewa with some English, and visual elements of the singers in the setting of a Ngoni village, wearing Ngoni traditional animal skin outfits, and doing the Ingoma dance, an intertribal thematic, linguistic, and visual space is represented.

Music Video Semiotic Analysis

This brings us to videography, the visual representation of Malawian identities and the country itself depicted in Amapiano and Afropiano music videos. Whereas South African Amapiano music videos are often set in dark clubs with numerous choreographed dancers performing oftentimes sexual dances, many of the settings in Malawian music videos are outdoors with dancers, while keeping the commonality of group choreography, dance in a less sexual manner (e.g. *Kusangalala* choreography uses a simple and repetitive arm motions, the dancers are everyday people in work or school uniforms in settings that match their occupation, and the camera angles include entire bodies, never zooming or panning to specific areas), reflecting Malawi’s religious values amidst a “party” genre. Music videos are shot in Malawi patently show off the country in places that are either recognizable to locals or at least familiar to those who have been to similar locations. Furthermore, daily Malawian life is portrayed additionally through the imagery of clothing selection, activities, and humor.

Temwah's video for *Tumeni* shows her in vibrant traditional clothes in an average outdoor food market much like the ones my friends and I would frequent to gather fresh food for our meals where one can see the wealth of Malawian agriculture in the variety of fruits, vegetables, fish caught from Lake Malawi, and live chickens that locals sell on dirt road streets. Jetu's *Chakwaza* is also filmed mostly set in an outdoor market. *Waimanya* opens with a panoramic drone shot of what appears to be Blantyre, showing the beauty of the Malawian city.

The video for *Ndsangalala* shows Way2Savage, Zeze Kingston, Joe Ikon, and Leumas holding solo cups and a joint in an outdoor market that looks half-closed. There are other men hanging out in the background with the artists when they are not singing, contributing to the casual and organic depiction of what a day with friends could look like.

Many of Ajuh Guffi's music videos, coincidentally also his most viewed, are set in average Malawian villages. In *Chedwa*, the setting is a village with buildings of red mud bricks and straw thatched roofs on top of plastic tarps or thin metal slabs. Laundry is hanging to dry. Men are wearing Western clothes, some with woven hats used for agriculture work. In the background you can see local men dancing and having casual interactions. A group cooks together over an outdoor fire, which is also how we cooked food in some of the places we stayed.

Part of his music video for *Ndani* appears to be filmed in the same location, and in the opening scene he prays before eating a feast of papaya, bananas, meat, potatoes, apples, bread, and an orange juice that looks similar to Sobo, a popular and delicious Malawian juice. This is contrasted by scenes with young dancers doing choreographed

dances in a dark and foggy garage, more resemblant of the party atmosphere in South African Amapiano music videos. The imagery in the video for *Usandinyase* showcases the Lipenga's concept of the youth's state of "waithood." Ajuh is reprimanded for attempting to steal tomatoes from an outdoor market in the opening scene, followed by him selling lollipops in the street. The background dancers are all young men dressed in school uniforms or construction hats and various blue-collar uniforms.

These are just a handful of examples of music videos that highlight parts of daily life in Malawi from the setting, clothes, food, activities, dances, represented demographics, economic depictions, humor, and more- aspects which are relatable or recognizable across ethnic groups, therefore making videography an expression of intertribalism. Malawian Amapiano music videos are recognizably "Malawian" through images that offer glimpses into Malawian cultures.

Hegemonic Contestations

While Amapiano has not experienced the same degree of linguistic contestation of the Chichewa hegemony in the form of lyrics in indigenous Malawian languages, it does contest other demographic hegemonies, such as gender and generational, through artist representation. Since the aftermath of the Mbumba performances during the "presidency" of Kamuzu Banda (Semu 2002), women have asserted themselves as figureheads within the musical scene, namely in Gospel with artists such as Miracle Chinga and Princess Chitsulo. In the religious and predominantly patriarchal society, the support for female artists in the Gospel genre has a lengthy history. However, women have continued to expand their musical reach in popular secular genres such as Reggae with artists such as

Sangie and Queen Fyah and Hip hop with Lady Pace and Rina to name a few. As mentioned in Chapter 2, there has been an increase in female artistic presence and popularity with Afrobeats, and the same can be observed in Amapiano with artists such as Temwah, Jetu, Tuno, and DJ Muller, and a newer face to the scene, Afropiano artist Oana. Eunice reflects

There are more women in the industry now. At first, it was people had that belief like “a female can’t do this a female can’t do that.” I think with the education coming in maybe people have learned a lot and now they are letting gender work properly; the equality should be there. And now Malawian female artists, there a lot of them.

Female representation directly combats the male hegemony and dominance in artistic spaces.

Another contestation is generational. Like Hip hop, Amapiano is a genre by and for youth, a group that makes up the greater part of Malawi’s population yet have little jurisdiction over political decisions. Unlike Hip hop, Amapiano is not inherently political, although one could argue that the artistic youth internationally collaborating with and representing the nation in a genre that is about celebrating life in the present moment is indirectly political in that it exemplifies the values of the younger generations. With the bulk of Amapiano artists belonging to the millennial or Gen Z generation, there are a couple of outliers that widen the musical audience in Malawi specifically. Ajuh Guffi is a recent artist with a pure and punchy Amapiano sound. Being only eleven years old, he belongs to Gen Alpha, and his influence for his generation is evident in choreographed dances on Tik Toks and YouTube Shorts. There is also a lip-synched music video made

by children even younger than Ajuh Guffi to his song, *Chedwa*. Working with director Stafa Awosh, Ajuh's videos have acquired an impressive number of views for a small discography, with three out of four of his songs posted on the Stafa Awosh Director exceeding 1 million views.

On the opposite end of the spectrum representing the Boomer generation is 74-year-old viral Amapiano sensation, Jetu. She has several songs on YouTube with multimillions of views and is the only elderly Amapiano artist that I have come across, making her music a unique contribution to the musical conversation while combatting the younger generation's hegemony within Amapiano by connecting with them through the genre itself. This connection can be seen in the YouTube comment sections of her songs.

For example, in her song *Waimanya*, @nicelychikopa5902 acknowledged the positive impact on the community of Jetu and her team by saying “as one person who loves the elderly i applaud Emmu Dee and Dyokhwe for the job exceptionally done, they've literally beaten the Elderly Abuse record by making Jetu a household name, if we don't see and recommend their efforts then tikulakwa, Welldone guys!!! Smell your roses.”

In the same comment section @digeniusnyanga6925 wrote “the fact that Jetu has spiced up the video with some of notable Bangwe/Namiyango elderly women ie Mayi Ayiya, Mayi Nasuva and many more, we are extremely grateful 🧡🌸😊...Jetu is probably the best female artist currently in Southern Africa 😍😊😊😊 Finally, as governor of United States of Bangwe (USB), I endorse this video to reach many million views as soon as possible.”

Many affectionately refer to her as “grandmother” or “granny,” which can be seen in the comments on her video for *Chakwaza*.

An example of this is by user @goldmanmambo2472, who stated:

“🇲🇼 Malawi let's gather here for the support of our grand mother 🔥🔥🔥🔥🏆🏆,” a sentiment that was shared in a comment by @preciousbitson2352: “Our own grandma from warm heart of Africa, Malawi the Nation. This woman is courageous 😊.”

Jetu is an inspirational figure, with several acknowledgements such as this one from @Its-Cai-liveitup: “This the only Malawian song that am watching more five times a day, not that others are not good but I love the fact that she can still make it at 71. She had inspired me alot, age does not define success. You can be successful at any age. You are not too late to make, consistency is the key.”

MacDonald, who does not regularly listen to Amapiano, is impressed with Jetu’s presence. He said:

She started creating these amazing, catchy [Ama]piano songs. Everybody’s just into it and everybody is just able to relate with her. You’re able to see her as a human being regardless of her age. Her songs have gained more traction with the youth. You’d find that people are calling [her] out for concerts in colleges – these two [groups of] people who would not really have been in the same place.

MacDonald’s statements demonstrate Amapiano’s potential to facilitate cross generational fosters relatability by connecting the far ends of the population (the youth being the most populous and the elderly the least, but both populations with higher degrees of financial dependence than the middle generations). For this he credits both Jetu as an artist and the momentum of Amapiano as a genre saying that Jetu “is an elderly

woman, but then people can actually relate to her songs and because it's [Ama]piano and everybody is into [Ama]piano at the moment. It is sort of united."

Location and Participatory Musicking

Finally, Amapiano demonstrates intertribalism through its participatory essence. Amapiano is often played at public venues, usually in more populated and blended cities such as Blantyre and Lilongwe, where ethnic identity is not noticed. Social media is also a site for participatory musicking in that music videos and viral reels on various social media platforms often feature short and relatively simple dance trends that people learn, repost, and recreate. These trends are also physically reproduced and reconstructed in improvisatory moments on the dance floor, with the context of various conversations and the sounds of the surrounding environment, contributing to the communal aspect that makes this genre able to connect listeners with diverse backgrounds. I experienced this in 2022 when I was living and working in Bangkok, Thailand. I occasionally went to a Latino club called Havana and an Afrobeats club called Bafros purely for the music. One time at Bafros, an upbeat song that I had never heard which sounded like pure joy was playing. I noticed a girl doing a simple yet choreographed dance next to me. She also noticed me enjoying the music and taught me the dance to the chorus of the song, *Buga (lo lo lo)* by Kizz Daniel and Tekno, and we danced the rest of the song together. After the song ended, she introduced herself as Nona from South Africa. Like me, she was an ESL (English Second Language) teacher living in Bangkok, and we became friends. Some months later, when I was traveling in the Philippines, I taught the same dance to Natsumi and Taiki, two Japanese friends I made in Malapascua. This is just one

example of how Amapiano moves through the world, connecting music lovers across race, ethnicities, generations, economic class, gender, religion, language, political affiliation, and borders.

Eunice speaks to the unifying ability Amapiano has for young adults occupying nightlife-centered locations, saying “It’s like a small group of people that like Jazz... Reggae is outdated. The range of people who listen to Reggae wouldn’t be from 18 to 35 because those people are still vibing Amapiano. When it comes to Amapiano, let’s say there’s an event that’s going to just be playing Amapiano songs; that event is going to be full.”

She elaborates that while it may be a youth-leaning genre, the setting of the genre bridges ethnic group gaps, making it intertribal. “In clubs, everybody dances there. Like we just have the dance troupe. It doesn’t matter what Tribe you are from. We’re all going to dance there together.” Connie echoes this sentiment: “It’s in the club. The main thing there is literally just vibing...it’s easy to with Amapiano music; you already know it’s a vibe.” The act of “vibing” transcends identity barriers.

In these ways, Amapiano is a living embodiment of shared cultural exchange, illustrating the capability of modern global musics to foster positive connections and create communal spaces for diverse audiences. Not inherently political, this unification serves as a movement towards establishing understanding across borders. This spirit is what encompasses the saying “Amapiano is a lifestyle.”

Song Analysis

To provide a snapshot into Malawian Amapiano and Afropiano and further exemplify how intertribal elements interact within these genres, I have analyzed two popular Amapiano songs: *Kusangalala* by Zeze Kingston and *Pangolin* by Jetu.³¹ I chose *Kusangalala* by Zeze Kingston because it is an example of a popular Malawian Amapiano from an already established musician in the scene, Zeze, that closely follows the “formula” of South African Amapiano with a few distinctions, namely the application of the log drum. The song selection is also partially for sentimental reasons because it was one of the first Malawian Amapiano songs I was introduced to by my friend MacDonald mere months after my time in Malawi, when Amapiano had really started kicking off in the music scene. MacDonald, despite not liking Amapiano and only discovering it during my stay in Malawi, liked this song a lot and told me that it became an anthem of sorts for young people in the country. I remember listening to it so much that I could phonetically sing every word without knowing the meaning.

I chose *Pangolin* by Jetu as an example of the emergence of a Malawian take on Amapiano that fuses the two genres together, also with positive reception. This selection analyzes sonic fusion of the originally South African genre with an already established “Malawian” sound, discerning which components are recognizably Malawian, and demonstrating that there is a musical movement towards patenting a more concrete national or intertribal identity with the modern musical climate.

³¹ These analyses are meant to be read as representative glimpses into how Malawians are localizing Amapiano. It is impossible to show the breadth of a genre’s development with only two examples.

Both examples exhibit musical intertribalism because they are enjoyed by Malawians irrespective of ethnic and cultural background. Both are sung in Chichewa, the language from the dominant Tribe that is learned by most Malawians irrespective of Tribe, fall into common Malawian lyrical themes (*Kusangalala* is a song of encouragement and *Pangolin* is a celebration of love), and visually exhibits collective Malawian identities.

Kusangalala

Sonic Analysis

Kusangalala- Zeze Kingston and LeuMas

Tempo: 112 bpm

Key: B minor

Time Signature: 4/4

Duration: 5 minutes 11 seconds

Chord Progression: i7 - VII - VImaj7

Form: Groove-centered, cyclical harmonic structure

Instrumentation: shakers, synthesized clap, bass drum, log drum, electric bass, electric guitar, piano/keys, strings, xylophone

Form		
Section	Duration	Musical Features
Pre-Intro	16 bars	• Woman laughs • Percussion groove established • Synth with background ostinato • Keyboard outlining chords • Guitar melodic line
Intro	8 bars	• Vocal calls (“Una-na-na”) • Guitar gradually becoming more complex
Verse 1	16 bars	• Lead vocals introduced • Bass (1st beat of every measure and the “and” of 3 every 4th measure) • Sparse texture with vocal and rhythmic emphasis
Chorus	16 bars	• Repeated lyrics • Syncopated log drum • Strings • Background vocals • More dense texture

		• Xylophone
Break	20 bars	• Log drum takes forefront • Plucky guitar motif • Hollering and whistling in background • Vocal line picks up into Verse 2
Verse 2	16 bars	• Lead vocals are back in • Spare texture with focus again being on the vocals • Background vocals added (call-and-response)
Bridge	8 bars	• Log drums back in • Increase in background vocals (call-and-response) • Drum pattern intensifies
Chorus	16 bars	• Repeated lyrics • Vocal layering • More dense texture than previous chorus

Outro	24+ bars	• Increase in rhythmic density and intensity • Plucked guitar • Ends with singers repeating the chorus (acapella)
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For an Amapiano or Afropiano song, *Kusangalala* does not deviate from expected instrumentation, tempo, chord progression, pacing, or rhythmic drive. The tempo BPM=112 falls within the range of a typical Amapiano song: BPM=110-115, the chord progression is repetitive and non-resolute to maintain the hypnotic continuity characteristic of the genre, and there is the constant presence of a shaker in eight-note subdivisions with a synthesized clap on beats 2 and 4 (see Figure 26). The log drum generally sticks to a slightly embellished double tresillo pattern throughout the song and is more temperate and drier than what can be heard in many South African Amapiano songs (see Figure 28 for an example). For example, it is typical for the log drum to get a solo during the beat break, but the log drum during this part is key-centered with leaps not exceeding an interval of a 5th (D-G in downward motion measure 2) (see Figure 27). The rhythm is syncopated, but mellow with little variation comparatively.

What makes this song intertribal besides the Chichewa language, theme of encouragement, and videographic depictions of Malawian experiences is the relatively calm implementation of the log drum, the use of the xylophone, the presence of the guitar, the call-and-response of between Zeze and the backup voices, and the acapella

chorus that ends the song. No single one of these aspects is considerably and undoubtedly “Malawian,” but in combination and application they become intertribal.

Kusangalala

Zeze Kingston and LeuMas



Fig 26: “Kusangalala” shaker and “snare” (transcribed by author).

Kusangalala

Zeze Kingston and LeuMas



Fig 27: “Kusangalala” log drum (transcribed by author).

Most Wanted Log 002

DrummeRTee924



Fig 28: SA Amapiano log drum sample (transcribed by author).

Music Video Semiotic Analysis

The music video for *Kusangalala* by Zeze Kingston x LeuMas depicts a calm, atmosphere-driven environment which showcase rural Malawi. Zeze and other men are traveling through the sun-washed countryside in a roofless car. They can be seen standing up or precariously seated on the back of the moving vehicle laughing and dancing. This frequent motive of the open-air car continuously moving through Malawian roads could symbolize the forward motion of life while the men expressing joy in the car representing the freedom that comes from the individual choice of choosing to move through life lightly.

I did not notice this until my friend MacDonald pointed it out, but the video features alcoholic beverages, with the men in the car drinking and driving and later a scene in a bar. MacDonald said, “it is an uplifting song, but then if you look at what they are implying, the song’s version of being happy is about alcohol, partying, girls, and the

like.” He said he does not feel this message represents Malawi, but it is more characteristic of the Amapiano genre’s partying theme. This implication would only be noticed by those who watched the music video.

The second motif between which the first motif shifts, shows stressed individuals: a single man at a bar, a student in a classroom, and a construction worker, all surrounded by people in their environment, but the camera focuses on their feelings of isolation. There are other characters featured in career settings: an army officer, nurse, and chef. Eunice identifies education, religion, and workplaces as “the only places that will make you feel unified...because when it comes to employment, you can’t just employ people from one Tribe. You’re going to employ everybody who is qualified for that position. Qualification doesn’t entirely look at Tribes. It looks at how a person has their eligibility to be in that sector.” The showcasing of these spaces is intentional because they are relatable to all regardless of ethnic background, making the message intertribal through setting. At the start of the first chorus, the construction worker begins the dance described earlier followed by the rest of the people in the music video. The student and career centered imagery is meant to show the economic struggles that many Malawians, particularly young Malawians, face in their daily lives, establishing relatability among the youth who experience “waithood” (Lipenga 2023).

YouTube Comment Section Analysis

The comment section of the *Kusangalala* music video is a location where listeners encouraged each other to keep going through the hardships of life, but also a site for national unity and cross-border alliance-building.

Some Malawian commenters felt a sense of national pride from this song.

@AllieKachala

“It's music like this that makes us proud to be Malawian 🇲🇼🇲🇼🇲🇼🇲🇼”

@fahadmzeeh1846

“I pray that one day this channel will have millions of viewers coz the entertainment we getting from this guy is way too much 🔥🇲🇼 carry the flag ZEZE”

@JohnjrnPhiri-uw2op declared that Africans should work together to spread *Kusangalala* beyond Malawi, writing:

“Not only malawia'ns need to see this... But almost all Africans lets push this fellaz.....Good one zeze ❤️”

Still, listeners from neighboring countries showed their support by including their country's name in the comments, a signifier of regional alliance-building.

@Wholelottadynasty

“Though i don't understand much of the language but SA 🇿🇦 approves this!!!!”

@TellyShalumba

“This song connects with my soul. much love from zambia 🇿🇲 thank you my neighbors for this amazing hit” @BrightonSeleli-Jr

“As A Zambian I'm proud that I bumped Into this Song....I love the message, the production and the Video.....Big Ups the Song is on Repeat”

@CkonarStoneMedia

“Listened to the song before reading lyrics 🇿🇲🇿🇲🇿🇲🇿🇲 And I connected, I felt something...After I read lyrics it made sense... Wow 🇿🇲🇿🇲 🙄 🔥🔥🔥”

Kusangalala transcended regional support with user @SharifulIslamjk2js commenting:

“Hi I'm from Bangladesh, I love ❤️ this song. 🇬🇧 🍷”

This comment section snapshot is not an exhaustive list of the support *Kusangalala* received. The pride displayed from Malawian listeners, and the evidence for positive reception of extended audiences is indicative of the success Malawian Amapiano has in forming intertribal and international connections.

Pangolin

Sonic Analysis

Pangolin- Jetu

Tempo: quarter note = 150 BPM

Key: G major

Time Signature: 4/4

Duration: 3 minutes 28 seconds

Chord progression: I-V-V-I looped

Form: Groove-centered, loop-based, cyclical structured form

Instrumentation: log drum, bass-y hand drums, synth, synthesized ulimba, clap, whistles, cymbal/high-hat, choir

Form		
Section	Duration	Musical Features
Intro	8 bars	• Groove is established • Female voice says tagline bar 4 • Log drum introduced bar 5 (higher register) • Female voice says tagline followed by a group (echo affect) bars 9 & 10 • Jetu's melody picks up into Chorus
Chorus	32 bars	• Beat drops • Bass drum • Pitched off-beat rhythm of synth is layered with a more dominant synthesized ulimba (improvisatory) • Jetu and Choir (call-and-response) • Log drum returns bar 17 • Male voice harmonizes with Jetu
Verse 1	16 bars	• Instrumentation reduced; same as intro • Offbeat 'clap'-like distant bass drum slightly before beat 3 every other bar • Ulimba comes back bar 9 • Jetu's voice is layered with other voices

Chorus	16 bars	• Same instrumentation as previous Chorus • Whistles added • Log drum reenters
Beat Break	8 bars	• Log drum, whistle • Ululation bars 2-5 • Choir in distance
Verse 2	16 bars	• Same instrumentation as Verse 1 • Ulimba returns bar 9 • Cymbal crescendos to Bridge
Bridge	8 bars	• Cymbal hit • Whistle back • Chorus changes (call-and-response)
Chorus	24+ bars	• Same as before • Acapella voice layering outro

Pangolin has dramatic sonic distinctions from a typical South African Amapiano sound. The tempo is exponentially faster than usual, with a BPM of 150; however, this is a typical BPM of numerous indigenous musical practices such as the Tchopa from the Lomwe ethnic group. The time signature is a standard 4/4, but the swung-feel syncopated groove heard is the *manganje* rhythm used in traditions such as the Manganje (Yao), Tchopa (Lomwe), and Vimbuza (Tumbuka). The kick drum is steady on the beat, but an unidentified synth and ulimba (traditional Malawian xylophone) play the syncopated

rhythm special to Malawi (See Fig 01). When the ulimba takes over this rhythm, there is much variation, creating an improvisatory feel.

Pangolin

Jetu



Fig 29: Manganje rhythm in “Pangolin” (transcribed by author).

The log drum, like *Kusangalala* is not as tonally or rhythmically adventurous as what is demonstrated in South African Amapiano. It keeps a syncopated feel but stays tonal only using I-V pitches (see Figure 30). The log drum is used similarly to the solo drums that have pitch (eg. *namalema* in Tchopa), but with less irregularity, fitting into the pocket of beats rather than around the beat.

Pangolin

Jetu



Fig 30: “Pangolin” log drum sample (transcribed by author).

Besides the ulimba, the use of whistles (another instrument common across cultural musical practices), ululations, and the cymbal (used to build momentum at the

turn of a major phrases similarly to Gospel) consolidate as sonic indicators of a “Malawian” sound.

Jetu’s vocal line is mostly syncopated, and the melody is highly repetitive, functioning almost as another pitched percussion, a feature commonly seen in Amapiano. This melody is punctuated by a sustained call-and-response line from the mixed choir. The anticipation and interjection of Jetu’s line before the choir begins and finishes creates an overlap that aids in continuity and cyclical feeling of the Amapiano genre (see Figure 31). Additionally, this overlap interplays with the looped chord progression that is an anacrusis (I-V-V-I) and sits atop the *manganje* rhythmic engine, elevating the cohesion of each sonic element.

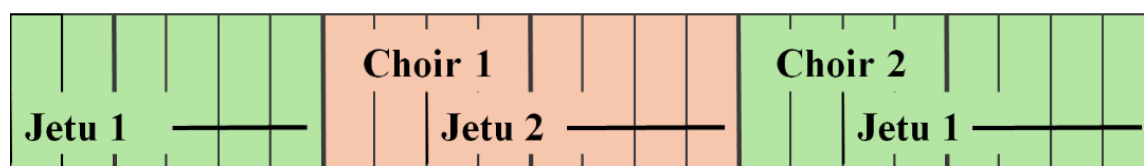


Fig 31: “Pangolin” call-and-response pattern in chorus (by author).

Figure 31 can be read as follows: each box is one bar/measure, green represents G major (I) and orange represents D major (V). The numbers in the boxes indicate the parts of the phrase and correspond with the text being sung, which together comprise the fourbar phrase, or main idea, that is repeated throughout the Chorus. The line shows that Jetu continues singing through the second bar of each “mini phrase.”

Lyrical Analysis

Jetu uses the animal pangolin as a metaphor for a partner who is as special and rare as the endangered species. Nholva informed me that the pangolin is an animal that was hunted in Southern Africa, but this was made illegal in 2026. If someone is caught

poaching the pangolin, the body becomes the government's property, which is why Jetu sings:

“*Katundu wa boma*” or “the government's property” when referring to her *pangolin*.

She illustrates the uniqueness of her love with lines including:

“Soulmate unalikuti

Enawa amanditayitsa nthawi”

or

“My soulmate, where have you been?

Some of these people I met before you wasted my time”

and another:

“Kodi alipo wina akumva kukoma kuposa apa” or in English “Is anyone happier than me?” to which the choir responds: “Eeeeh mukunama” or “no way!”

Humorously, the only qualities of the man discussed and presumably what makes him special is his monetary generosity. Jetu celebrates:

“Salary

Yikalowa, ndimakhala pa budget

Girlfriend allowance” which means

“Salary

When it's in, I get on a budget

Girlfriend allowance”

She then proceeds to list the things she receives with his money such as nails, eyelashes, clothes, and fancy dinner dates, making this both a love song with some humorous materialistic undertones.

<i>Pangolin</i> by Jetu	
Chichewa	English
“Pangolin”	[Pangolin (depicts something precious like gem)]
Iwe ndindani?	Who are you?
Ine ndi Jetu	I am Jetu!
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	Let’s bring him out, for you to see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Amuna anga, pangolin	My husband, the pangolin
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	Let’s bring him out, for you to see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Alamu anu, pangolin	Your in-law [your husband], pangolin
Wona pangolin, wona pango (eeeh)	See the pangolin, See the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Amuna anga, pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin

(Sure)	(Sure)
Wona pangolin, wona pango	See the pangolin, See the pangolin
(eeeh)	(eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Your in-law, a pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
(Sure)	(Sure)
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	Let's bring him out, you should see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Amuna anga pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	Let's bring him out, you should see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Alamu anu pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
Soulmate, unalikuti	Soulmate, where have you been?
Enawa amanditayitsa nthawi	The others waste my time
Ndiuze, unalikuti	Tell me, where were you?
Zomwe ukundipangira	The things you are doing for me

Dale sindikupasa chance	Darling I won't give you a chance
Popeza ndi second choice	Because it's the [I am your] second choice
Ndipatse mpata ndiyime pa chulu	Give the space so to stand on hill [get the spotlight]
Ndizionesere ukulu, anthu adziwe	I should show off the growth [us], people should know
Ndipatse mpata ndiyime pa chulu	Give the space so to stand on hill [get the spotlight]
Mapewa anga mmalere	With my shoulders up [showing gladness]
Palibe angandilande iweyo, wanga ndi iwe	No one can take you away from me, you are mine
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	Let's bring him out, you should see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Amuna anga pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	We should bring him out, they should see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Alamu anu pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin

Wona, pangolin	See, pangolin
Wona, pango	See, pangolin
(eeeh)	(eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
(Sure)	(Sure)
Amuna anga pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
Wona, pangolin	See, pangolin
Wona, pango	See, pangolin
(eeeh)	(eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
(Sure)	(Sure)
Alamu anu pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
(Nthungululu)	(Ululations)
Salary	Salary
Yikalowa, ndimakhala pa budget	When it's in, I get on a budget
Girlfriend allowance	Girlfriend allowance
Amandi blessa ndi ka TransID ati ndisamasilire	He blesses me with transactions for me not to lack things
Yinayo yama nails	The other money is for nails

Mu saloon mulowe, muwale mubene	Enter the saloon, you should shine
Don't forget eyelashes	Don't forget eyelashes
Yina ya dress, surprise	The other money for the dress, surprise
Tivale madzulo night	We should wear it in the evening
Tikadye ku Amaryllis	Let's go eat at Amaryllis hotel
Kodi alipo wina akumva kukoma kuposa apa?	Is there anyone feeling happier than this?
(Eeeeh mukunama)	(Eeeeh you're lying)
Kodi alipo wina akumva kukoma kuposa apa?	Is there anyone feeling happier than this?
(Eeeeh mukunama)	(Eeeeh you're lying)
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	Let's bring him out, you should see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Amuna anga pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	Let's bring him out, you should see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property

Alamu anu pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
Wona, pangolin	See, pangolin
Wona, pango	See, pangolin
(eeeeh)	(eeeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
(Sure)	(Sure)
Amuna anga pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
Wona pangolin	See, pangolin
Wona pango	See, pangolin
(eeeeh, sure)	(eeeeh, sure)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	Let's bring him out, you should see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property
Amuna anga pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
Timutulutse muone pango (eeeh)	Let's bring him out, you should see the pangolin (eeeh)
Katundu wa boma	Government property

Alamu anu pangolin	Your in-law, a pangolin
Wona, pangolin	See, pangolin
Wona, pango	See, pangolin

Music Video Semiotic Analysis

Jetu is “dripped-out” (as we Gen Z-ers say to mean someone looks very fashionable) in matching outfit sets and her signature sunglasses. Behind her is a large group of young men in white tank tops, colorful *chitenjes*, and brown brimmed hats who throughout the video sing as the call-and-response choir, clap, and dance in celebration. There is a framed photograph of the rare pangolin animal.

Jetu walks into a house of women holding hands with a man with Dwarfism and hands him off to a young woman. The older women are seen sitting and eating meals with *nsima*, talking, and dancing.

The humorous aspect of the song comes into play with the uniqueness in her lover and the reason why she compares his rarity to that of an endangered species (i.e. pangolin) being represented by the male lead having Dwarfism.³² He can be seen climbing atop boxes to dance with the female lead eye-to-eye, which is a ploy to be comical. The man is later seen giving the woman money, which aligns with the lyrics regarding his financial provision, after which she picks him up and spins him around.

³² This is not a reflection of my opinion.

Nholva described Jetu's marketing as "her presentation seeks to relate to the youth, and it works in both a comedic and artistic manner." This is not necessarily a display of intertribalism, but a connection across generations since Jetu is 74-years old and is one of the leading faces in Malawi for a genre that was only recently created. She achieves this through her fashion sense, humor, and high-quality music that resonates with the youth.

YouTube Comment Section Analysis

The commenters in the music video of *Pangolin* not only poured out praise of Jetu and her craft, but they also sounded off Malawian pride with comments such as:

@solomongrant5415

"Are we now suppose to waste our bundles watching music from abroad? Let's support our local music my fellow Malawians. This is awesome talent."

@ThangateniBaton-ks1jr

"She has taken Malawi music industry to America. What a video, indeed they had enough time to come up with beautiful track." and support from neighboring countries with some comments reading:

@MukomaMulenga-th1rs

"Anyone from Zambia 🇿🇼 here"

@takeshizm1843

"🇿🇼🇿🇼 big love from Zambia *Pangolin* all the way ❤️"

@james-b8d1

“Watch from Tanzania 🇹🇿” proving that Malawian Amapiano from an elderly female artist using Malawian sonics has the power to unify Malawians (intertribalism), different nations (alliance-building), and generations.

Conclusion

The acceptance of Amapiano in the Malawian music scene was a natural sequence given the close musical relationship in the region of Southern Africa, specifically between South Africa and Malawi. This preformed relationship and the presence of media paved the path for Amapiano to travel from South Africa to Malawi, where it is undergoing transformations that are indicative of intertribalism. Sonic similarities between Amapiano and Malawian indigenous musical practices made the transition more seamless and are perhaps reintroducing some traditional instruments that have been musically neglected in other genres. While many of my interlocutors were skeptical of Malawian musicians developing, others acknowledged that there are some aspects in play that are uniquely Malawian including the involvement of rhythms from other Malawian sources, the use of the Chichewa language, and positive themes (often centered in Christianity) that unite not only the youth but are beginning to branch towards older generations. There is also an uptake in the presence of female artists in Amapiano, suggesting that the musical climate is shifting.

Afrobeats has been established in the Malawian musical scene for a longer duration than Amapiano and therefore has seen a greater degree of sonic experimentation through the infusion of “Malawian” sounds. As time progresses, Amapiano will likely continue to be shaped by Malawian musicians and listeners as they adapt the genre;

adaptations that simultaneously reflect in a music sense where Malawi has been and where it is going.

Final Thoughts

Malawi is a culturally diverse country consisting of numerous ethnic groups, languages, religions, and customs established over time through a history marked by cultural exchanges and musical mobility through migration (both emigration and immigration), colonialism and post-independence authoritarianism meddling and resistance, freedom of expression in a multi-party democracy, and the influences of technologies and media. Historical happenings have transformed the social and cultural climate of Malawi, and Malawians have transformed with it. Musically, this has looked like adopting and adapting genres in personal, local, regional, continental, and global exchanges. While on the surface some may argue that Malawi has overwhelmingly adopted foreign genres, Malawians have always demonstrated agency in this integration through the process of selective sonic syncretization. This process is a musical negotiation of identities at all levels, and one that has aided in forming a sense of intertribalism in a nation home to many diverse ethnic groups with their distinct cultures.

In the current music scene, one that is saturated with Afrobeats, a genre from Nigeria, and Amapiano, a genre from South Africa, Malawian intertribalism is expressed through:

- the use of the Chichewa language, which skews the visibility towards the hegemonic Chewa group, but also allows for maximum accessibility given that it is the national language,
- lyrical themes which emphasize romantic love over lust, Christian worship, encouragement, and “waithood,”

- videographic elements that show daily Malawian experiences and both homogenic and heterogenic cultural symbols,
- public locations and social media, and accessible dances which lay the foundation for participatory musicking, and positive interactions based on sharing enjoyment, and
- the infusions of Malawian sonic elements including the application of instruments, rhythms, song samples that already had a home in longer established Malawian musics.

These intertribal indicators are still in the process of coalescing in Malawian Afrobeats and Amapiano. Malawian musicians have a hand in how the genres fuse and evolve locally and beyond. Positively, Malawian music is receiving the most international attention for these genres than in others in the form of awards, views, and streams. YouTube comments offer their support from Malawians but also people from across the globe, particularly regional neighbors. The genres also foster regional artistic collaborations which make obvious that the intertribalism expressed resonates beyond a Malawian audience, contributing to discourses on musical mobilities throughout southern Africa.

Data shows that Gen Z Malawians are more inclined to think of themselves as “Malawian” over their ethnic group label as seen in Figure 33. From the sample of survey participants, the most “agree” responses show that Malawians are proud to belong to their ethnic group, and the most “disagree” responses show that Malawians feel less connected to others from their ethnic group than their national identity. These responses all point towards intertribalism, which is reflected in the popularity of Afrobeats and Amapiano.

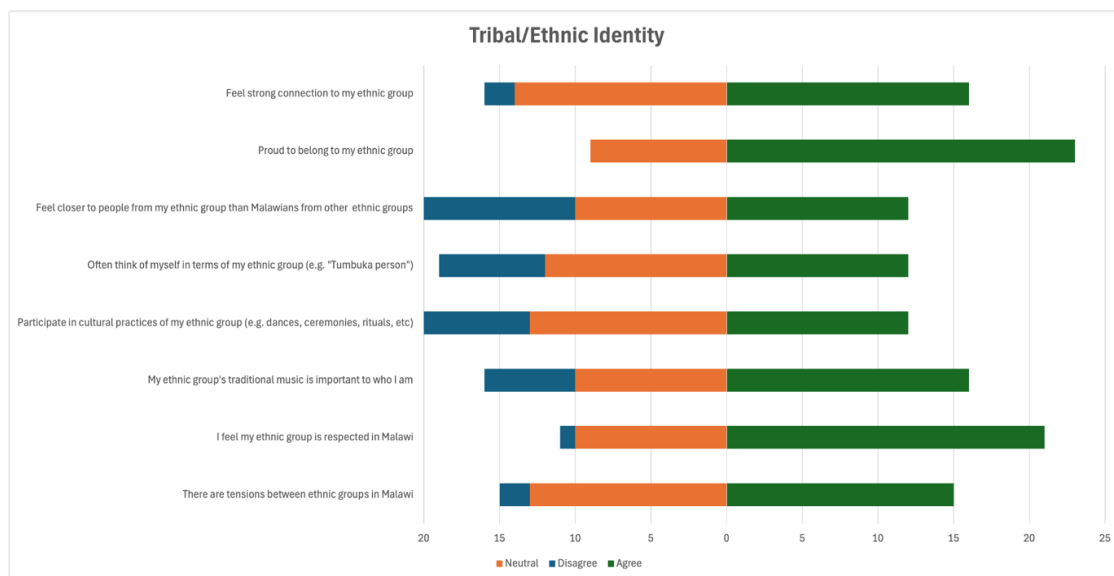


Fig 32: Tribal/Ethnic identity beliefs.

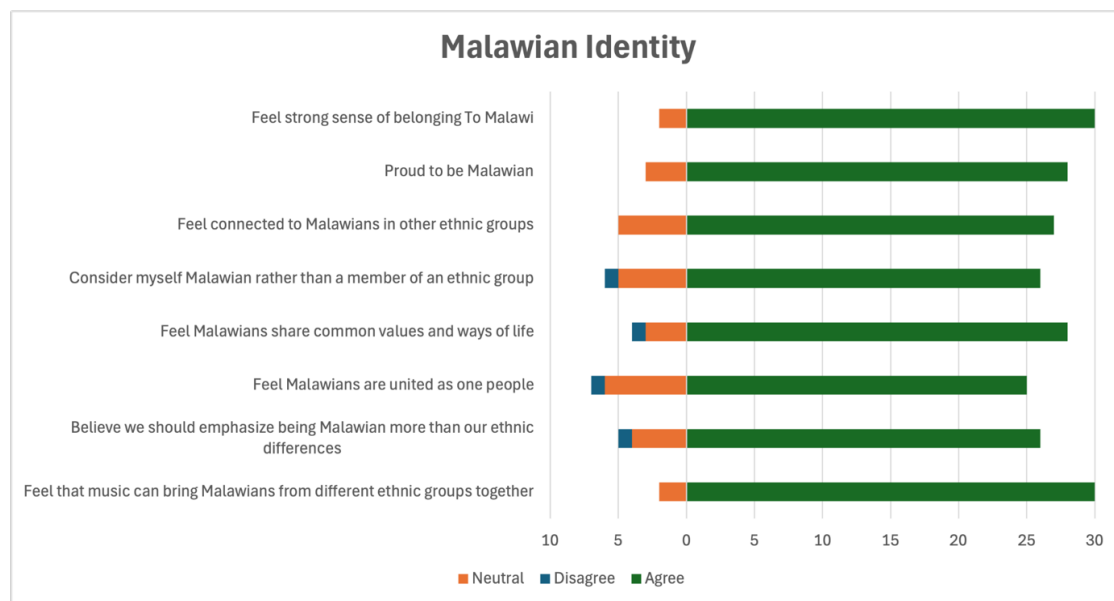


Fig 33: Malawian identity.

The question I posed at the beginning: “What does Malawian intertribalism sound like?” is one that can only be met with more questions. For Malawi, a nation of dynamic cultures, the diversity and history of its cultures is reflected in sound. It sounds like every genre that has and is and will be engaged with by a Malawian musician, and recent inclusions are Afrobeats and Amapiano. Traditions, musics, and identities are not static;

they are always interacting and evolving in reflection and reaction to their environments; shaping and being shaped by one another in a network of cross-cultural exchanges expanding outwards and spiraling inwards, building and negotiating connections.

Mquzama speaks to the unifying power of these foreign genres made intertribal by Malawian musicians, saying “I think the coming in of Amapiano and Afrobeats unite us. This is a genre [that] gained traction amongst maybe not just the youth; even most of the adults listen to Afrobeats and Amapiano. So, it’s something that has gone past tribal boundaries. It’s something that really unites people.” In other words, Afrobeats and Amapiano become a space for connection... *malo oti timvetsetsane*.

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- Chipli, Kate. 2025. Interview by author. Whatsapp. December 11.
- Chipli, Kate. 2026. Interview by author. Whatsapp. March 23.
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- Cosmas, Nholvahiwa “Nholva” 2026. Interview by author. Whatsapp. March 29.
- Kalirani, Jeremiah. 2025. Interview by author. Whatsapp. December 12.
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- Lupeska, Constance “Connie”. 2025. Interview by author. Whatsapp. December 5.
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- “Mazani.” 2026. 2026. Interview by author. Whatsapp. April 2.
- “Mquzama.” 2025. Interview by author. Whatsapp. December 13.
- “Mquzama.” 2026. Interview by author. Whatsapp. April 8.
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- Sherah, Eunice. 2026. Interview by author. Whatsapp. March 16.

Malawian YouTube Videos Mentioned

PRIMARY CASE-STUDY SONGS (Full Comment-Section Analysis)

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAvlzUaz3Rw>

Namadingo & Gwamba, feat. Temwah & Lawi. "Mumapemphero." 2024. YouTube

video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85T-lF-CCAw>

Zeze Kingston x LeuMas. "Kusangalala." 2023. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNUIKv4auYE&list=RDRNUIKv4auYE&start_radio=1

Jetu. "Pangolin." 2025. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBMKAmd-ZQA&list=RDuBMKAmd-ZQA&start_radio=1

ADDITIONAL SONGS DISCUSSED IN LYRICAL/THEMATIC/SONIC ANALYSIS

Eli Njuchi. "Tempolale." 2024. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTxRB8QclCA&list=RDaTxRB8QclCA&start_radio=1

Namadingo. "Tuli." 2025. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYCPSZDeN2g&list=RDOYCPSZDeN2g&start_radio=1

Tay Grin. "Tcha." 2023. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuRV1T_epXs&list=RDJuRV1T_epXs&start_radio=1

Tay Grin. "Tchalosi." 2024. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orheXwc4MhU&list=RDorheXwc4MhU&start_radio=1

Namadingo. "Msati Mseke." 2015. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMBc1FqmhTM&list=RDjMBc1FqmhTM&start_radio=1

Praise Umali & Eli Njuchi. "Love Me Now." 2023. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vp9OFUW0c84&list=RDvp9OFUW0c84&start_radio=1

Jetu. "Chakwaza." 2024. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKfPgky7i3g&list=RDOKfPgky7i3g&start_radio=1

Ajuh Guffi. "Chedwa." 2025. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi2EPa_E2kM&list=RDoi2EPa_E2kM&start_radio=1

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Oana, feat. Loisa. "Ndiwelengere." 2026. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8laGFey13A&list=RD8laGFey13A&start_radio=1

Emmie Deebo. "Go Konko." 2025. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2d5dQxDqmo&list=RDn2d5dQxDqmo&start_radio=1

Temwah & Theresa Phondo. "Yesu Wanga (Suyo)." 2024.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GG5r9I0wg-I&list=RDGG5r9I0wgI&start_radio=1

Praise Umali, Kell Kay, & Zeze Kingston. "Ku Tiyeeni." 2023.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvvBzZLfJHY&list=RDyvvBzZLfJHY&start_radio=1

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vsswL5iXoc&list=RD3vsswL5iXoc&start_radio=1

Dreimo MW. "Magini." 2024. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5lKbAni6bg&list=RD_5lKbAni6bg&start_radio=1

Emmie Deebo, feat. Platform (Qaso). "Hapa." 2024. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mflp_ZT3QZg&list=RDmflp_ZT3QZg&start_radio=1

Kell Kay, feat. Yo Maps & Prince Luv. "Bana Pwanya." 2024. YouTube video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7htEtgbGaw4&list=RD7htEtgbGaw4&start_radio=1

Eli Njuchi, feat. Yo Maps. "Yabaya." 2023. YouTube video.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOoEEZY_jTI&list=RDmOoEEZY_jTI&start_radio=1

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KEVm1VlIVoA&list=RDKEVm1VlIVoA&start_radio=1

Yo Maps, with Tay Grin. "So Mone." 2023. YouTube video.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cu7UZWeRccc&list=RDCu7UZWeRccc&start_radio=1

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Fada Moti. "Kutali." 2024. YouTube video.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KG54dkX3OGQ&list=RDKG54dkX3OGQ&start_radio=1

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Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: May 29, 2026

IRB#: 19757

Principal Investigator: Taylor R Dawkins

Approval Date: 05/28/2026

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: INTERTRIBALISM IN THE MUSICS OF MALAWI AND THE CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGE OF GENRES: HOW AFROBEATS AND AMAPIANO NEGOTIATE A SENSE OF MALAWIAN IDENTITIES AND VICE VERSA

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Ioana Cionea, Ph.D.
 Chair, Institutional Review Board

Survey Questions

[General demographic questions]

1. When you listen to music, what do you listen for typically [select all that apply]
2. How often to you listen to... (frequency ranking of selected genres)
3. Where do you mainly hear music [select all that apply]
4. When do you listen to Afrobeats and Amapiano
5. Rank how often you listen to music from Malawi and foreign countries (1 being the most frequent and 7 being the least)
6. Tribal/Ethnic Identity: Please indicate how strongly you feel about each statement
7. National (Malawian) Identity: Please indicate how strongly you feel about each statement
8. Please rank which languages you hear most often in Malawian popular music (1 being the most and 5 being the least)
9. What do you think makes Malawian music “Malawian” [select all that apply]
10. How connected do these genres make you feel to other Malawians (sliding scale)
11. Afrobeats and Amapiano: Please indicate how strongly you feel about each statement
12. Intertribalism: Please indicate how strongly you feel about each statement

13. In your opinion, which type of music best expresses a shared Malawian identity today (choose one)
14. In the past 12 months, how often have you participated in events where Afrobeats and Amapiano were central (parties, festivals, concerts, etc.)