

Cultural Relations Collection

Artists and audiences: reimagining the role, impact and value of contemporary festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa through a global pandemic

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Foreword

Over the past year we have come to understand more clearly than ever the value of cultural relations and connection generally. If the world is to face and overcome the challenges of the future in a co-operative and collaborative manner, then cultural relations has a vital role to play.

The British Council's responsibility is to create the person-to-person connections that build trust and enable collaboration across national borders. Coming at the same time as a global pandemic, the United Kingdom's new post-EU status means we have a particular responsibility to use all the tools of international engagement wisely. Last year, like everyone else, the British Council faced some very big challenges. We're now in the process of looking closely at ourselves to make sure we're fit for the future.

The pandemic has shown us how much cultural exchange can take place digitally, and the expansion of our digital services, already under way, will only accelerate. In everything that we do, our values and the values that the UK seeks to promote around the world will be paramount.

It is essential to underpin the many and various activities of the British Council with a body of academic thinking about and around the subject of cultural relations. This essay collection is a showcase of both the quality of that thinking and the breadth of activities that come under the heading of 'cultural relations' – everything from astronomy to the everyday encounters of street and marketplace. It's a rich and optimistic field.

For research into the power and purpose of cultural relations, a period of history when normal human encounters and gatherings are banned presents a special interest. Regardless of the range of subject matter, each essay was written in the context (or shadow) of Covid-19, which has reshaped the meaning of encounter. The pandemic has made some things impossible – or at least illegal – while expanding other channels of communication and connection beyond what we believed achievable just a few short months ago.

What remains both possible and inevitable is the need for human beings to create culture in all its forms, and to communicate their feelings and thoughts about it to others. This collection is a brief and welcome contribution to that endless, fascinating and ultimately human process.

Kate Ewart-Biggs

Interim Chief Executive, *British Council*

Preface to the Cultural Relations Collection

Welcome to the new series of essays from the British Council's Research and Policy Insight Team. This collection seeks to deepen understanding of cultural relations by inviting early-career researchers to examine both theory and practice. An important word in our open invitation for submissions was 'afresh,' with the aim to seek new voices to explore what has been the British Council's business – building connections, understanding and trust – for more than 80 years.

Under one sky. When first reading this submission from one of this collection's authors, I was struck by the aptness of the title, not just for her own work – a fascinating journey through cultural co-operation through astronomy – but for the situation we find ourselves in today.

Much has been said about whether or not we are, as some commentators claim, all 'in the same boat' when it comes to Covid-19. The statistics in the UK alone about infection and death falling disproportionately on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities suggest otherwise, as do concerns about the long-term impact on young people due to their extended time out of school. On the global stage, WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned in January 2021 of a 'catastrophic moral failure' if equitable access to vaccines is not achieved, with the poorest countries far behind the Global North when it comes to vaccinating their populations.

Yet while we are not all in that boat, we are all under one sky. That means that as well as the moral impetus to ensure vaccines are distributed around the world, there is a practical one – if the virus grows and mutates in countries where they cannot vaccinate populations, while at the same time wealthier countries are opening up borders and economies, we may find ourselves once more facing restrictions to halt that spread. Covid-19 is yet another common challenge that requires collective dialogue and action.

Through building connections, understanding and trust, the British Council's work in cultural relations seeks to create the conditions for dialogue and co-operation, whether it is around tackling a pandemic, addressing climate change or achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

In this collection, our writers explore cultural relations through varied lenses – astronomy, science communication, arts festivals and urban public space – but all address the power of coming together, of interacting and collaborating. In his essay, Will Haynes suggests that cultural relations happen in the spaces immediately around us, in the way city dwellers negotiate the places around them, navigating through difference and challenge as they come. Hannah Dagleish looks to the space above, in outlining the history of 'remarkable' intercultural openness and collaboration between astronomers.

The two remaining essays examine how Covid-19 has accelerated innovation in cultural relations activity. Gary Kerr explores the role of science diplomacy, and how a major international competition in science communication was rapidly forced online by the onset of Covid-19. Co-operation and innovation allowed for the move to digital. Poppy Spowage looks at how African arts festivals have led the way in delivering continued meaningful interactions between artists and audiences, despite the global pandemic. Both essays raise questions about how experiences are made, audiences are nurtured and connections developed and sustained in a virtual world.

At the time of writing, it seems likely that this shift to digital interaction will remain, if not as the new normal, then as a major part of our ways of living and working for some time to come. We will need to negotiate new ways of interacting with our neighbours, locally and globally, and to co-operate on the major challenges ahead. As Poppy Spowage notes in her essay, uncertainty itself is the catalyst for change. It is likely that uncertainty is here to stay. We hope that this collection offers some new insight into how cultural relations can help navigate the way ahead.

Christine Wilson

Head of Research

Research and Policy Insight, *British Council*

Editor's notes

Most of us are likely aware of the impact that Covid-19 has had on our cultural lives. Successive lockdowns have robbed of us of cinema, theatre and live music, and in countries where restrictions persist, we look enviously to those places where people have been able to take pleasure in these activities once more.

We are likely also mindful of how this has impacted on the cultural sector around the world, and the precarity of artists' livelihoods. In this contribution, the author looks at both the personal and the socio-economic impact aspects of culture, and argues that both have significant value, and warns that too much focus on the latter risks damaging the former.

In particular, this contribution focuses on festivals across the African continent. As in other essays, we can see the unlocking of innovation in responses to the pandemic. Yet in this case, the author argues it was not only out of economic necessity, but also that festivals that adapted were more able to meet their wider ambitions.

As with other contributions in this collection, the author touches on the challenges of replacing face-to-face contact – what she calls 'collective assembly' – with new forms of space for the collaboration so vital for the sparking of creativity. She reports with optimism on how this is working, and the fact that lockdowns have acted as a leveller here too, with smaller festival organisers now acting on a more level playing field with global counterparts, working with similar technologies, under similar constraints but with the benefit of agility and experience of adapting to circumstance.

Challenges remain. While pivoting online can open up the experience to those who would have been unable to travel to a venue, data inequality remains a huge issue. Despite significant growth, the World Bank estimated in 2019 that less than a third of the population had access to broadband. Yet this essay outlines how festival organisers, closely aligned with their communities, have been innovating here too, seeking partnerships with platforms accessible to those who have struggled to connect to virtual events, such as television.

This essay should act as a reminder on several fronts: that inequality remains, but it can be addressed through innovation; that donors should be mindful of not stifling creativity in the name of a western framing of 'development'; and that festivals are not only valuable for the economic benefits they bring, but as sites of creative expression and exploration. This echoes the view expressed by JP Singh in his essay in the previous Cultural Relations Collection, that the arts are intrinsic in 'who we are, what we think and what we do'.¹ As we try to imagine a new future, post-Covid-19, we will need them.

1. See www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/british-council-cultural-turn-international-development-participatory-infrastructures.pdf

Introduction

From the chaos of downtown markets to the banks of the River Nile, Sub-Saharan Africa is host to a vibrant and dynamic contemporary festival scene. In major cities and historic beach towns creatives are transforming dive bars, warehouses and national theatres, hosting some of the world's most cutting-edge art and performance festivals, attracting the attention of artists and audiences from around the world.

The year 2020 and the outbreak of Covid-19 came with stay at home and social distancing rules, and saw the indefinite suspension of many art and performance events worldwide. My own work as producer and co-founder of East African Soul Train (EAST), a pop-up residency and interdisciplinary festival centred around a journey on Tanzania's historic railway, was temporarily brought to a standstill. For months we grappled with what EAST could look like in the current context and have adapted our methodologies while maintaining a focus on the main principles of our work: catalysing connection, collaboration and cutting-edge work by artists from different geographies and disciplines, strengthening creative networks, sparking new opportunities and building new audiences.

For festivals – and the cultural and creative sector more widely – 2020 has been catastrophic. However, across Sub-Saharan Africa they have continued to innovate, demonstrating resilience, agility and the wider roles that they play in supporting artists, connecting local and global communities, and in shifting cultures.

Lock In Festival, based in Kenya and led by Creatives Garage, was one of the first events worldwide to react: in less than a month they took a programme of work by musicians, artists and storytellers online for 12 days in April 2020. Audiences were invited to explore the different virtual stages and activities via the festival website, clicking through to pre-recorded content which included performance, webinars and workshops, while also bumping into different craft makers and vendors along the way.² Free to attend, Lock In Festival emerged as a way to platform artists to new audiences, and tackle the financial disaster facing creatives through tip jars and donation options. Creatives Garage kept content online beyond the event, and aggregated together it had received over 1.4 million views by November 2020 (Kiilili, 2020).

As curfews and travel restrictions continued throughout the year, across the African continent festivals have continued to innovate, respond and reimagine how they can create meaningful experiences for artists and audiences in this new context. In this essay I ask what we can learn from how festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa are navigating and reinventing their events in 2020.

Despite multiple ambitions and a variety of business models, the dominant narrative about the role and impact of festivals is often closely tied to their economic value. Can focusing on what has been achieved in Sub-Saharan Africa through the global pandemic help stakeholders reimagine the role, impact and value of festivals beyond

2. See lockinfestival.org/home

dominant economic paradigms and, subsequently, enable them to support festivals more effectively?

Throughout the essay I draw on my own research in theatre, performance and development studies, as well as my practice as a creative producer. However, this research would not have been possible without the discussions that I have had with festival directors based across the continent and diaspora, whose voices and experiences I have attempted to weave throughout. These include: Lola Shoneyin, Aké Arts and Book Festival, Nigeria; Sheila Ruiz, Film Africa, UK; Teesa Bahana, KLA ART, Uganda; Liz Kilili, Lock In Festival, Kenya; Rucera Seethal, National Arts Festival, South Africa; Derek Debru, Nyege Nyege International Music Festival, Uganda; Yusuf Mahmoud, Sauti za Busara, Zanzibar.

While there are similarities between festivals on the African continent, 'it must be remembered every location also has its specific contexts, opportunities and challenges' (Mahmoud, 2020). I purposefully spoke with producers working in a range of contexts and disciplines, to capture the diversity of contemporary arts and performance festivals on the African continent, and to explore the *multiple* economic, social, cultural and political impacts that they can achieve, even through a global pandemic.

Looking beyond socio-economic paradigms

Among governments, donors and multilateral institutions, the value of contemporary festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa is predominantly located in their potential economic impact: their value and support (financial or otherwise) justified in terms of potential tourism, income generation, employment opportunities and capacity building. This emphasis on economic impact is mirrored by corporate sponsors, who harness opportunities for brand exposure among large festival audiences to generate revenue.

The Sub-Saharan contemporary festival scene is emergent and growing, and often festivals are not entirely self-sustainable. While there are different economic models for bringing festivals to life, with limited government support, many remain reliant on multiple sources of income: the ticket sales and the commercial opportunities that their events open up, corporate sponsorship as well as international donors.

Such donors often maintain a strong focus on directly addressing economic and human-centred development goals, or have a focus on cultural relations: promoting development outcomes through particular types of international collaboration. Development scholars Polly Stupples and Katerina Teaiwa argue that this emphasis frames the discourse that so often surrounds artists in developing

contexts: 'Leave aesthetics to the *superficial* artists of the first world and let artists of the third world think and act on their political issues' (Stupples & Teaiwa, 2015: p. 5) [emphasis original]. This in turn can promote 'self-censorship on behalf of emerging artists and arts organisations in order to get funding and thus limits broader creative, intellectual, expressive and ultimately "cultural" exploration' (Stupples & Teaiwa, 2015: p. 5). Essentially, funding and sponsorship often comes with particular strings attached: organisations are too often 'burdened by the way calls for funding are often addressed around frameworks of global concerns that do not always align with the pressing local issues that organizations want to address' (Naeff et al., 2020: p. 182).

Whether focused on specific economic outcomes or certain types of collaboration, bold creative visions for events that connect different communities often have to be moulded into particular narratives and – with funding only focused on specific activities – the invisible relational, affective and aesthetic structures that bring festivals to life have to be creatively sourced.

Sub-Saharan African festivals can – and do – have a significant economic impact on local communities. For example, in 2020 Sauti za Busara in Zanzibar employed approximately 500 Tanzanian artists and crew members. Sauti za Busara is a pan-African annual music festival organised by Busara Promotions, a non-profit NGO registered in Zanzibar.³ The festival attracts thousands of people from around the world to the island's historic city Stone Town. Stages are mounted in the Old Fort, the professional networking forum Movers and Shakers takes place alongside fringe concerts and events around the city. With close to 30,000 festival goers, Sauti za Busara has a clear economic impact on the local community, estimating an annual boost in Zanzibar of more than US\$10 million, with visitors spending money within the community, buying local food, drink and handicrafts and exploring the island beyond the predominantly foreign-owned beach resorts (Sauti za Busara, 2020: p. 5).

As well as economic impact, increased tourism and income generation also provide validation for the significance, importance and quality of festivals and their associated activities, both locally and internationally (Debru, 2020). However, the reality is that festival producers in Sub-Saharan Africa have a vision for their work that goes beyond such tangible outcomes. For example, alongside offering employment opportunities, Sauti za Busara looks to provide a platform for expression, connection and celebrating cultural pluralism (Mahmoud, 2020). My discussions with

producers for this research revealed a unanimous ambition to create spaces that are 'public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in voice, scene, and purpose' (Stoeltje, 1992: p. 5). Festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa are platforms and life-lines for creatives, but they are also affective spaces that nurture creative communities, develop audiences, spark new ideas and ways of being: they shift cultures.

From Coachella in California to Sónar in Spain, many festivals around the world have decided to put their activities on hold and cancelled events in 2020. Across Sub-Saharan Africa festivals have been adapting. I argue that this is not purely because of the potential economic impact of sustaining activities, but instead because this new context still offers opportunities for meeting festivals' wider ambitions.

Over the last decade, led by James Thompson, there has been an 'affective turn' in theatre and performance research. While festivals do have clear socio-economic benefits for artists and communities, the focus of my research is on moving debates beyond the instrumental impact of festivals – the outcomes – the argument being that in 'failing to recognise affect – bodily responses, sensations and aesthetic pleasure – much of the power [of performance] can be missed' (Thompson, 2009: p. 7). Thompson's argument is that when identifiable social-economic impact persists as the main and necessary objective, the importance of the creative work itself can be forgotten.

3. See www.busaramusic.org

The 2020 global pandemic took the world by surprise, especially the cultural sector which – while consumption online for music, literature, film and storytelling was in high demand – economically was brought to a standstill with all live events cancelled and normal modes of income generation stalled. Ticket sales and the tourism around festivals have halted, tours have been cancelled, contracts broken and future employment opportunities for artists and crew are still looking bleak. The exact repercussions are unclear, but the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights that the cultural and creative sectors are among the hardest hit by the pandemic, ‘with jobs at risk ranging from 0.8 to 5.5% of employment across OECD regions’ (OECD, 2020: p. 2).

If the impact of festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa is based around their socio-economic value, 2020 was devastating: ‘The crisis has resulted in severe loss of employment, a drop in sales of goods and services and purchase of intermediate inputs’ (OECD, 2020: p. 16). While there have not been any specific studies on the economic impact of the pandemic on festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa, the cancellation of SXSW festival in Austin, Texas,

reportedly led to a loss of US\$4.3 million in direct income alone (I Lost My Gig, 2020). While some festivals managed to maintain relationships with particular stakeholders and continue to nurture elements of the ecosystem, long-term reductions in public, private and consumer investment across the creative and cultural sectors are anticipated (OECD, 2020: p. 16). If socio-economic outcomes remain the focus, as Thompson argues much of the power of performance is lost and everyone would be following the UK Chancellor Rishi Sunak’s ‘deplorable’ advice that ‘musicians and artists who cannot find work in the pandemic [...] should retrain and find different jobs’ (Cetin, 2020).

But festivals haven’t stopped. Despite the economic impact of Covid-19, festivals across Sub-Saharan Africa have continued to innovate, reimagine and reinvent their events, finding new ways to create *affective* experiences that have profound social, political and cultural impact on artists and audiences. I argue that focusing on these achievements offers an opportunity to understand the wider roles, impact and value of festivals on the African continent, and support them more effectively.

Understanding different approaches to the global pandemic

There is – and has been – a tendency (from the ‘Global North’) to focus on the *potential* devastation of the global pandemic across ‘Africa’: ‘painting with a wide brush a whole continent of 54 countries and dismissing efforts of African governments to deal with the situation’ (Okereke & Nielson, 2020). The numbers of Covid-19 infections and fatalities in many African countries have been significantly lower than initially anticipated, especially in comparison with other parts of the world such as Europe and the US. There is speculation that this might be due to a host of reasons: a ‘relatively young population (more than 60% are under the age of 25), experience in epidemic control from tackling other diseases, cross-immunity from other coronaviruses, as well as low rates of travel and more outdoor living’ (Mwai, 2020). There have also been different government responses and guidelines country to country: depending on infection rates and health infrastructure such as testing and available hospital facilities.

Depending on their context – as well as economic models – Sub-Saharan African festivals have responded accordingly: some delaying events and finding new ways to support their community, others moving online or adopting hybrid digital–physical approaches to ensure they can operate within local Covid-19 regulations and don’t need to rely on international travel and visitors in the same way.

For example, KLA ART is a free bi-annual contemporary art festival in Kampala, produced by Ugandan Arts Trust 32° East, centring on the city and transforming relationships between artists and audiences. The last edition of ‘Off the Record’ was held in August 2018 and saw artists taking over disused buildings in Kampala’s central business district, vibrant large-scale installations suspended from buildings, pop-up photo booths in Nakasero market and performance artists weaving their way through alleyways, between the city’s tailors and fruit-sellers.

Director Teesa Bahana described how while Kampala has a vibrant cultural scene, you rarely encounter contemporary visual arts as you navigate the city. Established on the premise that everyone should have access and the opportunity to experience contemporary art – on transforming public spaces in the city – and supported predominantly by international donors who were able to delay their investments, KLA ART took the decision to delay their fourth edition of the festival by a year (Bahana, 2020). While the festival provides a platform for many contemporary artists, they are not reliant on ticket sales and have found other ways of supporting their community of artists through 2020: extending the scope of their work with artists in residence; moving to a new multi-purpose centre in Kampala and harnessing their international networks to administer emergency grants for local artists.

Over the last year Kampala has seen a wave of lockdowns and curfews due both to the pandemic and political unrest surrounding the 2021 general elections. Bahana emphasised the importance of bringing together contemporary artists with the city and new audiences but that delaying *enables* KLA ART to maintain their focus while keeping artists and audiences healthy and safe. It will also allow time for artists to adjust and reflect on the new context. The theme of KLA ART 21 is 'This is Ours', inviting artists and audience to reflect on questions of ownership and collectivity.⁴

The repercussions of the pandemic are nuanced and differ for each country. For example, the number of government-recorded Covid-19 fatalities in Tanzania has been low, and there have been fewer national restrictions in comparison with many other countries on the African continent. Scheduled for 12–13 February 2021, Sauti za Busara in Zanzibar is (at the time of writing) set to go ahead and Director Yusuf Mahmoud explained how their ambition is to show the world that African music is alive and strong, and that music and culture remain vital in contributing to social, cultural and economic recovery.

Sauti za Busara has been a staple of the continent's cultural calendar for 18 years, and this year aims to lead the way and set a standard for how events can respond responsibly, with increased investment in sanitisation and temperature testing across the festival site as well as in hotels and at the

island's ports of entry (Mahmoud, 2020). The dramatic drop in international tourism and reduced support from sponsors as well as international donors will have financial implications, and as such Sauti za Busara's focus will remain on local audiences and organisers have had to adapt: downsizing their programme to 14 shows on one main stage across two days, as opposed to the usual 36 shows on three stages over four days. Given these adaptations, the scale of their local economic impact is likely to reduce somewhat, and instead the focus will be on other parts of their vision: maintaining a live pan-African experience with artists from across the continent still programmed, and for people who are unable attend in person, they are also exploring options to broadcast elements of the festival on television and radio, as well as online (Mahmoud, 2020).

Other festivals have decided to move into an entirely virtual context for 2020–21. For example, in just 100 days the National Arts Festival (NAF) in South Africa produced a virtual festival from scratch: inviting programmed artists to make a new proposal for how they could share their work in a digital context. NAF is hailed as one of the biggest celebrations of the arts on the African continent. Held every year across 11 days in the small university city of Makhanda, in 2019 it featured around 2,500 performances including theatre, music, dance, film, physical theatre and comedy in over 60 venues around the city (World Fringe Alliance, 2019).

4. See klaart.org/

In the early stages of the pandemic South Africa experienced one of the world's strictest lockdowns, with people only allowed to leave their houses for essential purposes, all non-essential businesses shutdown and cigarette and alcohol sales banned (Smart et al., 2020). While many national restrictions had eased somewhat by the festival in June 2020, Artistic Director Rucera Seethal described 'how vital the continuation of the festival – in its adapted form – had been for artists who had struggled to create new work and earn a living through the pandemic' (Seethal, 2020).

For their 46th edition, NAF released over 270 hours of content, much of which can still be accessed online for a small fee, and the event received lots of positive feedback from artists and audiences.⁵ For NAF moving into a virtual arena also offered an opportunity to increase focus on new forms of digital art and performance, such as a sell-out WhatsApp theatre piece where up to 250 people could register per show on the instant messaging application (Seethal, 2020).

Whether delaying, adapting or moving online, festivals across the African continent have continued to mobilise despite the economic challenges that they are facing. This points to an ambition that reaches beyond tangible economic outcomes. However, despite their ability to adapt, if the conditions continue – or are similar – the question remains how can festivals translate the *affective* qualities of live events and visceral responses to performance in meaningful ways?

5. See nationalartsfestival.co.za

Affective experiences for artists and audiences in a virtual world

Festivals are centred around live experiences. One of the biggest challenges for festivals using online platforms is nurturing and creating a relational experience in a virtual world. Festivals are brought to life by communities, they are affective, relational and atmospheric: ‘perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relation with one another’ (Anderson, 2009: p. 79). They are meeting points for artists and audiences.

Everyone I interviewed for this essay acknowledged the possibilities that the internet had opened up for them in terms of connecting with new audiences, new artists and new professional networks. However, for many producers and directors translating the relational potential of festivals had been more difficult. Festivals are alive and collective: the different people, the specific smells, the unexpected sounds all come together to create unique experiences. As Shira Gabriel, Jennifer Valenti, Kritin Naragon-Gainey and Ariana Young argue, ‘collective assembly is more than just people coming together to distract themselves from life by watching a game, concert, or play—instead it is an opportunity to feel connected to something bigger than oneself; it is an opportunity to feel joy, social connection, meaning,’ all of which have important benefits (2017: p. 1,360).

In a virtual world communities’ stakes in a festival are different. Like. Scroll. Love. Tag. Unfollow. Artists and audiences are not only separated in terms of space, but as organisers

navigate challenges around the quality of audio-visual work when live streaming, a majority have opted for releasing pre-recorded material, which adds another layer of distance: time. Liz Kilili, Director of Lock In Festival, based in Kenya, reiterated that despite the opportunities that can be found in the virtual world – access to new audiences and the analytics to demonstrate what they are consuming – there are elements of a physical festival that can’t be found online: the emotional and surprise encounters between artists and audiences (Kilili, 2020).

As the opportunities and limitations of the virtual world have become increasingly stark, throughout 2020 festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa have been testing out hybrid models and experimenting with translating significant parts of the live and collective experience into a virtual setting.

Nyege Nyege is an annual electronic music festival that brings together the freshest musical acts from around Africa and beyond in a magical setting on the shores of the River Nile in Jinja, Uganda. Known for its cutting-edge curation, Nyege Nyege has quickly become a household name in the world of electronic music. It is widely respected for showcasing the African underground music scene to new audiences, but also for connecting underground musicians from across Africa with one another, and with producers and musicians working with African music outside of the continent.

Normally hosted at Nile Discovery Beach Resort, the sixth edition brought together over 300 artists from 45 African and Afro-centric collectives for a 96-hour hybrid virtual experience: 'bringing chaos to the digital dancefloor' (*Dazed Magazine*, 2020). Co-Director Derek Debru explained how as well as providing audiences with 'an immersive experience that [enables] them travel across the continent and discover [its] many different scenes', this virtual edition looked to create 'new connections throughout the continent and the world with collectives and artists [that Nyege Nyege] really wanted to engage with, in the hope that the momentum of the festival [would] carry these relationships towards new projects and collaborations' (Yaseen, 2020).

Festivals are platforms for showcasing previous work, but they are also vital in looking forward: meeting points that offer opportunities for creatives to expand their networks, spark new ideas, projects and collaborations. Separated in terms of time and space, Nyege Nyege still managed to nurture a sense of momentum remotely, with artists from 27 countries working together to produce hundreds of performances locally, record sets and develop virtual experiences that were premiered on YouTube and via Nyege Nyege's new bespoke online platform designed by Kenyan artist and activist Jepchumba.⁶

Travelling, drinking and celebrating together backstage, sharing hotel rooms and breaking bread at post-show gatherings – collective assembly – connects creatives in a unique way. These behind-the-scenes moments are catalytic, a way of establishing new relationships and sparking future collaborations and partnerships. Festivals across the continent have been experimenting with digital dancefloors, breakout rooms and WhatsApp chats, as ways of translating these immaterial elements of festivals into a new context.

In 2020, Aké Arts and Book Festival, normally based in Nigeria, also moved their annual event entirely online.⁷ Director Lola Shoneyin explained how the festival's ambition is to bring together writers, poets, musicians, dancers, filmmakers, actors and thinkers to dialogue and celebrate African creativity, illustrating where possible, and at every opportunity, what excellence looks like on the continent. Every year the festival hosts discussions, readings and an array of performances; it is a meeting point for artists from across the continent and rooted in the idea that it is critical that festivals celebrating African creativity take place on African soil (Shoneyin, 2020).

6. See www.nyegenyege.com

7. See akefestival.org

In 2020, Shoneyin embarked on a new partnership with Google and together they invested in developing innovative ways of moving their different events online. They managed to adapt Aké Festival's entire programme: hosting live panel discussions, book chats, writing workshops and theatre performances using Google's web-based platforms. Moving online enabled Aké Festival to extend their reach – connecting with new audiences – but also put them in a position to bring creatives together who historically might have found it difficult to travel to Nigeria and spend a number of days attending the festival. Determined not to lose the relational and affective qualities of the festival, Aké Festival even had a virtual Green Room where artists and speakers could meet and chat over a glass or a nibble: creating a space for the spontaneous connections between creatives that sharing physical space offers (Shoneyin, 2020).

Over the last five years in my practice and research, I have been exploring the generative potential of bringing people – physically – together for creative experiences and festivals (Spowage, 2020). EAST was established on this premise: building connection between emerging and established artists, as well as 'movers and shakers' from the industry, audiences, journalists and academics on a week-long creative adventure that allows people to build trust, synergies and develop new work through a – physical – journey.

While it has become much harder to bring people together physically, in EAST we have been experimenting with how to converge the opportunities offered in digital spaces – namely networks and audiences – with the generative potential of shared – live – experiences. In 2021 we will pilot a hybrid residency programme, which will connect teams of creatives in different cities through a virtual residency programme based around a series of on and offline games and performances.

Across the continent other festivals have also been experimenting with hybrid options to optimise audience experience. For example, Nyege Nyege festival had to 'consider how to create the sensation of community and global connection on an online platform' (Phillips, 2020). Online chat forums exploded while DJs performed to small audiences in peoples' houses, on an island and in Covid-19-friendly venues, the organisers capturing – and sharing – some of the magic of the Nyege Nyege live experience via virtual channels. They also partnered with Ugandan Breweries and the local delivery app Safe Boda, encouraging audiences to 'gather their squad', order in and create their own – live – experiences at home as they watched the madness unfold over the weekend. As music journalist Stephanie Phillips outlined, 'the Ugandan hedonists of Nyege Nyege safely spread their party spirit into every home that [wanted] it' (Phillips, 2020), making Nyege Nyege Festival 2020 easily the largest and most ambitious online event of the year (Yaseen, 2020).

While the online world has opened up opportunities to connect festivals and artists with new – often international – audiences, data inequality is a real challenge across Africa. For example, normally located in the small university town of Makhandia in South Africa, NAF has an important relationship with the local community, many of which struggled to access or connect with virtual events (Seethal, 2020).

Over the last year new media and television partnerships have been critical for many festivals on the continent: enabling them to share artists work with new – large – audiences, and also engage communities who don't have the internet data to access entertainment. Lola Shoneyin from Aké Arts and Book Festival explained how they had managed to secure a partnership with DSTV, Africa's biggest cable television provider with a subscriber base of almost 20 million (Mcleod, 2020), which is a first for the Nigerian arts and literature festival, and has enabled them to mainstream important conversations about African art and culture across the continent while many people were at home under curfew, reliant on television for entertainment and information.

Nyege Nyege also partnered with Uganda television station NBS (which is also available on DSTV), with some of Uganda's biggest stars sharing the stage with artists from the East African underground, and reaching up to ten million viewers (Debru, 2020). Debru reiterated the criticality of Nyege Nyege building local audiences alongside international ones, creating a home at home for underground and alternative artists and cultures (Debru 2020), pushing audiences' boundaries of what 'Ugandan' music looks like. When local audiences come to sip a beer on the Nile, they are introduced to a feast of different types of music, communities and cultures beyond the Ugandan and East African mainstream; in 2020 this effect was achieved through bringing a diversity of music and cultures into peoples' living rooms via their NBS showcase.

And even festivals that are going ahead in a more traditional way – such as Sauti za Busara – are exploring new partnerships and demonstrating a commitment to new types of audience engagement through and beyond the global pandemic.

Alongside audience engagement, 2020 has seen many festivals on the African continent reimagining how they work with artists. Without being able to congregate and produce art and performance for, and in, a specific location, many have opted to hand more responsibility over to artists who are designing, recording and creating experiences remotely. Festivals are using their networks and the internet as a tool, investing in their online platforms to connect artists with new audiences, partners and increase their exposure, but handing over the responsibility for the production of artwork to artists.

For example, Nyege Nyege was made possible by over 40 collectives from across the continent and diaspora that each led on the production and documentation of each of their events. For Co-director Debru, the big pull of making Nyege Nyege 2020 happen was the opportunity to 'interact with so many cultural actors on the continent [...] making it completely international and completely pan-African, which would, on one hand resolve the problem of not having any opportunities for artists to showcase their work in Africa, and on the other hand enable Nyege Nyege to create a huge network on the continent' (Debru, 2020).

While opportunities for income generation reduced for artists in 2020, many festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa have shifted focus to supporting the production of digital collateral. For example, Lock In Festival in Kenya concentrated on emerging and up and coming artists, commissioning music videos for acts that didn't necessarily have high-quality online content that has proven essential as 2020 unfolded (Kilili 2020). Similarly, Aké Festival in Nigeria commissioned the filming of a number of theatre performances to showcase in their virtual festival in October 2020, which artists could keep, share and showcase after the event (Shoneyin, 2020).

While the cultural and creative industries were brought to a near standstill around the world in early 2020, with a responsibility to artists beyond their specific events, many African festivals were not in a position to hit pause. Instead, they had to radically reimagine ways of working in order to continue supporting artists and their communities.

It is often assumed that festivals operate on short cycles: there is a call for specific commissions a few months before an event, work is produced and presented on particular terms, and consumed rapidly before the process starts again. However, festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa are often embedded in organisations and communities that support artists throughout the year. For example, Creatives Garage – founders of Lock In Festival – is a multidisciplinary space for visual artists, performing artists and tech innovators to network, share ideas, collaborate and share work in Nairobi. Ugandan Arts Trust 32° East are the producers of KLA ART but operate all year round, hosting artists in residence and events through the year in their multipurpose centre which includes accommodation, a contemporary art library, computers and editing suites, meeting areas and outdoor workshop space. Nyeye Nyeye also incubate artists throughout the year at their artist residency space and community studio, and offer 360° label and artist management services through their two affiliated record labels (Nyeye Nyeye Tapes and Hakuna Kulala) and in-house booking agency.

When joining NAF in January 2020, Artistic Director Rucera Seethal was interested in shifting NAF's relationship with artists and nurturing their creative practice in more consistent ways throughout the year (Seethal, 2020). The global pandemic turned everything upside down, but it also enabled a radical rethink of established ways of working with artists. In 2020, NAF put a new call out to artists. Rather than asking for a specific artwork – an output – the question was what does an online festival look like to you? What are your ideas for a digital platform? How can we support you? The festival's digital arts programme was expanded alongside showcases from theatre makers, musicians and dancers, comedians and filmmakers. For NAF, the global pandemic offered an opportunity to begin reinventing how they engage and work with artists.

The research for this essay has reaffirmed that festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa are more than annual events: they play a role in nurturing a wider creative eco-system and supporting artistic communities throughout the year.

Looking forward ...

Despite the immense challenges 2020 has posed to the creative sector, festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa have continued to innovate, demonstrating resilience, agility and emphasising the critical role they play in supporting artists and connecting local and global communities throughout the year. Just as 2020 offered festivals an opportunity to achieve their wider ambitions, refocus their events and shift how they work with artists and audiences, it is also an opportunity for international donors to reimagine how they support festivals on the African continent going forward.

Pre-2020 international funding structures, which many festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa are reliant on, were not working effectively. In the early 2000's Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen – among others – called for a recognition of the *multiple* ways arts and culture can contribute to development (2005). However, 'recognizing the agency of artwork has led many funding agencies to instrumentalize creative practices and expect organizations to demonstrably effect particular ideological and economic pursuits' (Naeff et al., 2020: p. 198). Consequently, while financial support from the international donor community has increased in the last 20 years, grants remain predominantly small, short-term, and outcome focused, which makes it hard for artists and creative organisations 'to innovate, take risks, learn and scale their efforts' (Reich, 2017).

As argued in *Dissonant entanglements and Creative Redistributions* (2020), while grateful for support, 'despite the best of intentions from donors who use a language of partnership, [creative organisations remain] dependent upon the donors for funding, and

cultural initiatives must convince their donors of the importance, meaningfulness, and impact of their work' (Naeff et al., 2020: p. 202). While many funders sympathise with the importance of the affective qualities of festivals in achieving wider impact, one of the challenges is a struggle for a vocabulary to articulate these elements which 'are difficult to grasp and hold onto, making it a challenge to describe, research and analyse them' (Pink & Sumartojo, 2019: p. 15).

By paying attention to what is happening on the African continent today, I have demonstrated 'that the transformative power of the [festivals] reside in the affective encounters they enable between artists and audiences' (Naeff et al., 2020: p. 200). While the post-2020 landscape offers opportunities for donors to continue supporting festivals in connecting new artists, audiences and professional networks, it is critical that the importance and catalytic potential of affective aesthetic experience isn't forgotten and is invested in.

Throughout the global pandemic, the festivals I spoke with have looked to their wider ambitions and focused on supporting their creative communities while experimenting with and translating the affective qualities of their live events in meaningful ways. In many ways, 2020 levelled the playing field: with small organisations around the world having access to the same tools and technologies as established (and sustainable) cultural institutions. Small teams – used to working in fragile and economically precarious contexts – were more agile, used to adapting, shifting direction and taking advantage of emergent opportunities.

There is often an assumption that moving online and reducing international travel saves money. Festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa are already good at doing a lot with few resources – but using technology, paying artists, taking risks and competing on global platforms is expensive. In addition, festivals' typical modes of income generation – ticket sales, corporate sponsorship, international funding – have changed, and they are simultaneously testing new partnerships with online platforms such as Google (Aké Festival) and Facebook (Lock In Festival), and Nyege Nyege have recently launched a new online platform, releasing exclusive digital content to their members on the basis of a monthly Patreon model.

Given the economic challenges facing festivals, now, more than ever, creative innovation needs international support. Throughout the year festivals such as Lock In Festival, Nyege Nyege and Sauti za Busara have led the way globally, and in different ways continued to demonstrate innovation. African festivals are shifting perceptions of the potential of African arts and culture – both on the African continent and internationally – something that is vital if we are to ameliorate the global structures of racism and inequality, recently highlighted by movements such as Black Lives Matter. By investing in the 'affective power of aesthetic and performative creations' rather than tangible impacts, international donors have an opportunity to bolster festivals efforts and challenge dominant hegemonies, redistributing 'social dispositions and political inter-dependencies' (Naeff et al., 2020: p. 200).

In *Forces of Art: Perspectives from a Changing World* (2020) Prince Claus Fund, Hivos and the European Cultural Foundation lay down a commitment to moving away from impact-focused narratives and recognising that the power of art, including festivals, 'lies in the potentialities activated by these affective encounters, even if they do not always materialize in measurable change' (Naeff et al., 2020: p. 197). As we enter a phase of significant austerity, it is more important than ever that where the power of performance lies is not forgotten.

As they readjust and test new financial models, festivals in Sub-Saharan Africa need international funders to continue to step up and take an 'an affect-oriented, rather than an impact-oriented' approach (Naeff et al., 2020: p. 230). As outlined, festivals have proven important spaces and platforms for expression, connection and celebrating cultural pluralism, as well as being essential to the creative sector's survival, and economic and social recovery. While approaches have differed context to context, taking advantage of opportunities to reach new audiences, artists and professional networks, while finding ways to still have a profound – visceral – effect on artists and audiences has proven universal. The need to develop new ways of experiencing art and performance – that don't wholly rely on physical social interaction – will continue to grow and must be nurtured.

With the right support festivals on the continent can lead the way, but this takes investing in their aesthetic potential, not the consigned ways that events will take effect but in the uncertainty of how they will unfold and continue to evolve creative communities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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