

Epilogue: The Power of Arts for Future Making in East Africa: From Kakuma Refugee Camp and Beyond

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Abstract

Through the example of migrants staying at the Kakuma Refugee Camp in north-western Kenya, I show what art consumption and production means for people living in marginalised and restricted places in East Africa. With its 30 years of existence Kakuma refugee camp has developed into a major city-camp and its residents are very active consumers and producers of art. In this context, as shown in this special issue, art has an important function of identity creation, connection to wider East African communities, to home and future places to stay as well as for the imagination, planning and making of alternative futures. This epilogue concludes the NJAS special issue “Art and Imagined Futures in Eastern Africa”, edited by Alex Perullo, Claudia Böhme, and Christina Woolner, and has not been peer-reviewed.

Keywords: art production; Kakuma Refugee Camp; Kenya; future; imagination

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About the author

Claudia Böhme is an anthropologist working at the interface of new media and migration. She has done long-term research on the Swahili film production and reception in Tanzania for her PhD at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz. After that she has been working at the Universities in Leipzig and Trier, Germany, focusing on African media, migration and refugee studies. Her latest project was on the role of smartphones and social media for East African migrants' trust building and future construction in Kenya funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Currently she is working at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media (GEI) in Braunschweig in a Telekom Foundation funded project on STEAM educational ecosystems for young people in Germany.

In April 2022 I met a young man from the Democratic Republic of the Congo who was working as a fitness trainer near Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. I was there conducting research on the role of smartphones and social media in trust building and future construction among migrants in East Africa.¹ My main area of research was Kakuma refugee camp, in north-western Kenya, 95 kilometres from the border of South Sudan. The camp was built in 1992 after the Lost Boys of Sudan, orphans from the 2nd Sudanese Civil War, fled to Kenya on foot and arrived in Kakuma. Today the camp and the adjunct Kalobeyei Settlement have grown into a massive ‘accidental city’ (Jansen 2018), with around 285,000 inhabitants from all over East Africa and the Great Lakes region (UNHCR Kenya 2024). The lingua franca between the many nationalities in the camp is Swahili.

I did an interview with the Congolese fitness trainer as I was interested in how he came to Kakuma, how he used his smartphone and social media, and how he imagined his future. Before we started, he said he wanted to ask me if he was correct that he knew me from the movies. I laughed with surprise and said “yes”. He regularly watched Swahili movies on YouTube, and he had seen me acting with the late famous Tanzanian comedian actor King Majuto in the comedy “Welcome Back” from 2006. I had acted in Swahili movies during my PhD research on the appropriation of the medium of video film in Tanzania and the establishment of a major Swahili film industry.

This example demonstrates how East African popular arts are circulating and are received all over the region. Digital media users vividly share content in their social networks and as such create an archive that sustains its popularity over time. In Kakuma Refugee Camp, where people are sheltering from the

various wars and insecurities in the region, popular culture is vitally important to the inhabitants. Living in a forced and marginalized environment, life is characterized by restrictions, regulations, and depression. However, Kakuma Refugee Camp can also be a place of dreams, hopes, opportunities, and chances for the future. This becomes most visible through the many artists and artistic forms that emerge in the camp, including film, music, photography, literature, poetry, and painting. With the use of new media services such as the Internet and social media, these artistic projects become more visible and can reach larger publics around the world.

People in Kakuma are producers and consumers of popular arts, and they regard themselves as part of an East African arts community. In Kakuma I have met film and music producers, singers, rappers, writers, visual artists, and fashion designers. Movies are shown in small video halls and artists take part in art competitions and festivals in and beyond the camp. One major centre and stepping stone for artistic talent is the organization FilmAid, which teaches refugees film production and organizes film screenings and festivals. Other examples are the mySTART initiative, which partners with GUA Africa, an organization founded by Emmanuel Jal, a former child soldier from South Sudan who became an activist and performer organizing workshops in which migrants could learn creative literacy through diverse art forms. New media and artistic techniques, as well as the initiatives of international sponsors, make it possible for Kakuma residents to take part in producing and consuming arts even while restricted in their mobility. In 2020 the Vodafone Foundation, with the help of virtual reality devices, made it possible for students at Kakuma Refugee Camp to take a 360-degree live real time exploration of the paintings in London’s National Gallery (Vodafone 2020).

As Kakuma Refugee Camp is more easily accessible than other camps and quite well

¹ The project was conceptualized and coordinated together with Michael Schönhuth at the University of Trier, Germany and funded by the German Research Foundation from 2020 to 2023.

known, local and international artists have come to visit the camp and some of them have worked together with refugees. In 2000/2001 the Nairobi-based Amani Peoples Theatre (API), in cooperation with UNHCR and Caritas Italiana, undertook a two-year peace-building drama project with young South Sudanese and local Turkana at the camp. The two parties have peacefully cooperated and produced a play and a dance performance on the topic of the recurring violent conflicts between refugees and the local community (Amollo 2008).

International artists have also made significant contributions to welfare in the camp. The Hollywood actress Angelina Jolie Pitt, who has worked as a UNHCR Goodwill ambassador, established a primary school for girls with special protection needs to the camp in 2002. The school has been so successful that it has achieved an 86% pass rate and one of its pupils scored the highest marks in the Kenyan national exams in 2014 (Wachiaya and Hure 2015). Anglo-Canadian artist Lisa Milroy visited the camp in 2015 and in the following year started the online Hands On Art Workshop for primary and secondary students, supported by Vodafone Foundation and UNHCR.² Another famous visitor and UN Refugee Agency High Profile Supporter was the South African actress and model Nomzamo Mbatha, who travelled to Kakuma on a United Nations Mission in 2018. The travel was part of LuQuLuQu, a fundraising campaign for refugees (Opile 2018). The Kenyan singer Henry Ohanga, also known as Octopizzo, who himself grew up in Kibera, Nairobi, one of the biggest slums of the world, has partnered with UNHCR to launch the “Artists for Refugees” project. He has come to the camp several times, beginning in 2015, and has produced a musical album together with over 20 camp inhabitants from Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camp, which he titled

“Refugeenius” (2016).³

These and other famous popular artists function as role models and have a significant influence on young people in the camp. The young people, in turn, become empowered and motivated to engage in the arts professionally, despite their difficult situations. Through art, migrants stuck in the camp can connect with the world, claim their identities and human rights, maintain their cultural practices, remember the past, bear the present, and imagine and build their futures. If they engage in artistic production, refugees can connect with other artists and recipients around the world and sometimes even become famous. To be artists enables them not only to present themselves with an identity beyond being refugees, but also allows them the possibility of participating in shows, training, or scholarships in Kenya and abroad. Like other artists, as we have seen in the collection of articles in this volume, refugee artists criticize their current conditions and politics, and imagine better futures for themselves, as well as for the people to whom they relate.

People who live in refugee camps like Kakuma have an uncertain future. They must rely on others and wait for decisions on their asylum cases, as they are dependent on the Kenyan policies on asylum and migration. Most people who live in Kakuma Refugee Camp have told me that they long for a future beyond the camp and a better life abroad, which they name *majuu* (‘a place above’). This longing is so strong that it sometimes becomes something that individuals obsess over. Cindy Horst, working with Somali migrants in Daadab Refugee Camp in north-eastern Kenya, has shown how this longing, which is called *buufis* in Somali, can lead to depression or even suicide. The transnational flows of money, information, and images can foster *buufis* (Horst 2006). This is especially the case with images that circulate via television,

² Lisa Milroy, “Hands on Art Workshops,” Lisa Milroy, accessed June 12, 2024, <http://www.lisamilroy.net/c/1000066/hands-on-art-workshops>.

³ Octopizzo, “About,” Octopizzo, accessed June 12, 2024, <https://octopizzo.com/about>.

Internet, and mobile phones, through which people actively imagine a future through the UN resettlement programme (Jansen 2008, 4).

As I have argued elsewhere, mobile phones and social media have a major effect on the imagination, planning, and discourses of resettlement. Migrants are now able to stay connected, report on their journeys, and relay experiences of their resettlement (Böhme 2023). The residents of Kakuma have different options for planning their near and far futures. Most of them hope for opportunities which will enable a life elsewhere. These include the UN resettlement programme, educational scholarships, and private sponsorship of Refugees Program for Canada. While only a small percentage of refugees are chosen for resettlement, hopes rise during the selection process and depression often emerges among those who have not been chosen.

Refugees who have gone abroad most often present a rather positive and idealized picture of their new homes, reinforcing the wish to go there in the ones who remain. A singer, who has enjoyed some fame as a refugee artist in Kenya, resettled in Germany in 2022. From this time on he posted videos in which he posed, performed, and sang his songs in front of posh neighbourhoods and expensive cars and let people back in the camp imagine that he had really made it. Due to this ongoing hoping and waiting, many young people in Kakuma put their future plans, including marriage and having children, on hold until they are able to leave the camp. Many older refugees have given up on their dreams of a better life elsewhere; they have become resigned and articulate that nobody will help them again. An exception is a man from Ethiopia, who has made his fortune as a big businessman in the camp and has become “a millionaire” (Halais 2017). As he told me, he has rejected resettlement to the US because he has everything he wants in the camp and would only lose his social status in his new destination.

Many refugees from South Sudan and

Somalia also articulate a strong desire to return to their homeland, although this remains impossible due to political insecurities and war. More than other nationalities, they show a strong connection to their community and country of origin; they actively inform themselves of news and politics at home and engage in social and cultural activities and artistic practices in the camp. The Dream Studio, for example, is a photographic studio in a place called Hong Kong, Kakuma 1, which was established with the help of an American photographer and a couple of young people from Somalia and South Sudan in 2017. At that time, it was in a small hut constructed of iron sheets and wood. The aim was to teach photography to people in the camp so they can visually represent life in the camp. As the name ‘dream’ shows, the focus is not on the hardships and struggles that migrants endure, but on the visualization of the dreams and future plans of inhabitants of the camp. Today the studio has been transformed into a major professional film and photo studio by its members. Two of its founders, some years later, received private sponsorship and now work and live in Canada.

This discussion of arts and the future of Kakuma Refugee Camp can be connected to the focus of this special issue in several ways. First, migrants relate to popular arts in East Africa through their social networks and shared cultural and language practices, trends, and fashions. Migrants from Somaliland are aware of and take part in poetry chains; other migrants listen to Tanzanian music, or consume literature and cartoons. The arts, in other words, help to foster a sense of community and belonging in chaotic and challenging situations. Second, artists become the voice of the people and the oppressed. They articulate the dysfunctions and injustices of East African societies, and they play a fundamental role in criticizing the postcolonial present and imagining a better future for their countries. The artist can be transformed into a prophet, a fortune teller, and a foreseer of the future.

A third role of East African artists is that they warn of the consequences of present actions in the future. They articulate ideas for better governance and policies, as well as suggesting ways that people should live together. Artists, in other words, make visible the power of the people if they unite and stand up against their oppressors. These art productions open spaces for debate and discussions, which are fundamental in creating democratic practices. In this way, they take part in shaping the political futures of their countries. The artist is, therefore, in a powerful position, which can provoke different forms of control and violence from regional governments. These range from forms of appropriation of the artist's message to censorship and imprisonment.

While the arts can be a means to articulate visions of the future, they are also strongly connected to the past in terms of style, language, and content. All papers in this special issue have shown us links to the rich traditional arts production in the region, especially to oral literature and song. We have learned of future imaginations in different regions, media, and particular styles of popular artistic production. Imaginations of the future are articulated through the centuries-old poetry of Somaliland, transferred into new media. The medium of cartoons, which originated with the emergence of the newspaper print culture in East Africa, has a longer history of artistic depictions of their everyday worlds. And the genre of literary biography in the East African literary print culture connects to oral traditions of retelling stories and memories of the past. While the internet and social media do bring all these different media together, other older and traditional media remain.

The themes in this collection, including popular arts under changing conditions, artists as the voice of the people, and the role of digital and social media in dissemination and coproduction hint at the importance of future research. The articles gathered here make clear the importance of the internet and

social media for artists in reaching different audiences globally. The Somaliland poems that Christina Woolner has discussed, for example, are now circulating online. The same is true for the cartoons discussed by Deo Ngonyani, most of which appear online. Uta Reuster-Jahn's account of Nicco ye Mbajo's biography as an artist shows the changing conditions from colonization to digitalization, in which the laptop is now the artist's office. Future research should therefore look at the role of digital media in the production, dissemination, and reception of arts and the effects that popular arts have through and in the digital space. The future as a topic of research can now be studied in new and innovative ways using digital research methods, through which the researcher takes an active part in digital production or analyses and deciphers the multimedia character and language of digital arts. New forms of research that occur on digital and social media platforms allow researchers to further comprehend the future. Examples are crowdsourced studies that ask people to discuss their visions, aspirations, and fears for the future online, and ethnographic studies that engage with online artistic communities. Another area of research, and one of the fastest growing, is data mining and analytics, through which a keyword search on Google can be used to understand trends and future patterns.

More research is also needed on individual artistic practices in the different countries and communities of East Africa. What common trends can be identified and where are there major regional differences? We would want to know more about the narratives, language, and images of artistic envisioning of the future. What does the future look like in the articulation of popular arts? What modes of futures do they use – realistic, fantastic, optimistic, dystopian? What are the genres of these future imaginations and which media generate a certain language and style of articulation? What can be said and outspoken and what is hidden and transformed into a secret code?

Another important theme is the rich body of African science fiction and Afrofuturistic work in East Africa, which is not presented here. What are the histories, common trends, and perspectives of Afrofuturism and African science fiction in the region, and how are they gaining more recognition in other parts of the world?

As we have seen in this collection, East African artistic production does not exist in a bubble. It is historically connected to circulating ideas, trends, and connections to other world regions. While we already know a lot about the appropriation of popular culture

from the West, we still know little about the reception and influences of African arts in the West. The internet and social media are crucial here, as people in the West, especially young people, connect with African popular music, fashion, or film.

Our intention with these papers on the topic of future imaginations in East African arts demonstrates that East African artists play a fundamental role in reflecting on and criticizing present states and in actively creating alternative futures with more just conditions for the people of the region.

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