

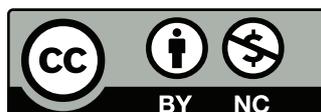
# Ugandan music stars between political agency, patronage, and market relations: cultural brokerage in times of elections

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## Abstract

The political agency of musicians in Africa has been analysed in terms of patronage, as either praising or protesting against political leaders. However, in the last few years, musicians across the continent have also become leading political figures themselves, with Bobi Wine and the People Power Movement in Uganda as the most prominent example. This article examines the changing relations between popular music and politics by focusing on how musicians engaged with the general election campaigns in Uganda in 2011, 2016, and beyond. Their engagement with formal politics cannot be characterised as political activism, patronage, nor as market relations. To understand this ambiguous political agency, I offer the notion of cultural brokerage as a way of approaching the plural strategies and indeterminate actions of young musicians on the political scene. Ultimately, the “bigness” of music stars has a different relational form than conventional patronage politics, and this may be changing how politics is done in Uganda.

**Keywords:** Uganda, politics, popular music, elections youth, cultural broker



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### About the author

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## Introduction

In early February 2019, the member of the Ugandan Parliament for the Kyadondo East constituency, Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi, was in Washington DC and gave an interview with CNN's Robyn Curnow. He has, over the last few years, become a central figure of opposition in Ugandan politics, but he did not represent a party and he insists that he is not a politician. At 36, Kyagulanyi has only been involved in formal politics since 2017, but he has followers across Uganda and powerful friends and supporters abroad. He is also, as it happens, one of the biggest pop stars in Uganda, popularly known as His Excellency Ghetto President Bobi Wine, leader of the Firebase Crew. In the CNN interview Bobi said:

We believe that by the time we get to the election, which is about two years away, we will have many Ugandans registered as voters – and overwhelming, Museveni looks like our only way out.

Curnow: So, do you see yourself challenging President Museveni?

Bobi: Well, this question has come up so many times. And indeed, many people have come to me calling for me to stand. We have been discussing this issue with my team. And I must say, I and my team are seriously considering challenging President Museveni in the next presidential election. (CNN 2019)

At home in Uganda, the interview was widely interpreted as Bobi Wine's declaration of his intention to run for president against the incumbent of almost 35 years, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni. It would seem that the youthful Bobi Wine facing off against an ageing President Museveni condenses chasms in Ugandan society between generations, between post-colonial politics and new forms of power and

“bigness”<sup>1</sup>, capturing shifts in how young people conceive of themselves as valuable and connected social persons and members of a global world. But it is necessary to take a closer look at the strategies and roles of musicians in previous Ugandan elections in order to understand how musicians like Bobi Wine have changed the political scene in the country. Based on ethnographic fieldwork over a period of 17 years in the burgeoning music industry in Uganda, as well as on a review of events in newspapers and social media, I will examine shifts in the use of popular music in election campaigns with a particular focus on the strategies and experiences of youthful popular musicians in Uganda.

While career politicians usually emphasise belonging and togetherness with voters in election campaigns, through direct exchange and by engineering relations of mutual dependence to gain influence, pop artists make their livelihoods and fame through mediated connections to fans and consumers. In this paper I analyse the often ambiguous dynamics between popular music and politics in Uganda, revealing the complex ways in which the relations between the two can neither be characterised as relations of political activism, nor as patronage, nor as pure market relations. Rather, young musicians operate within the tensions of all three forces at once in what I suggest should be understood as practices of cultural brokerage.

In the following I describe a shift that occurred during my fieldwork from young musicians being anti-political towards participating in different ways in political campaigns. This led me to consider recent scholarship on the

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers Orock (2019), writing about elites in Cameroon, elegantly captures how bigness, on the one hand, indexes social inequality and power in African post-colonial societies, as it divides “big men” from “little men” (Bayart 1993, 60–85), and on the other is a more fluid and precarious quality to social life, which is at once aesthetic and material, performative and embodied, always negotiated through both everyday and spectacular events (Orock 2019, 137).

relationship between music and politics in Africa, and I suggest that musicians as brokers and their political agency as cultural brokerage might be helpful when trying to understand the multiple and often ambiguous strategies of musicians in Uganda. Unfolding this brokerage further, I explore three key cases in recent Ugandan elections, in which “the new generation” and their music became central points of contestation in the field of politics. The analysis points to the cultural brokerage of celebrity musicians as a novel way of wielding political power in Uganda, but also points to the limitations on this practice, as the regime seeks to control and co-opt the music industry.

### A rush towards politics

Since 2003 I have been working as a media practitioner and as an anthropologist with singers, producers, and other aspiring and professional participants in the largely informal but rapidly growing music industry in Uganda. In the following, I draw on 25 months of fieldwork between 2003 and 2011 and 4 months in 2019–2020, including more than 200 interviews with singers, producers, dancers, journalists, and relatives of artists and producers. Over such a long period of research some encounters have involved a single interview or participation in the same workshop or concert, while others have grown into long-term collaborations and friendships. The analysis I present here is based both on the more superficial research relations, and also on working more closely with three very different groups trying to make it in the Ugandan music industry. These are the activist hip hop collective Bavubuka (meaning ‘the youth’ in Luganda); the more commercially oriented and successful Firebase Crew; and a more loosely knit group of young singers striving for success in the regional town of Gulu, in Northern Uganda. When I first started working with these groups around 2006 (and the youths in Northern Ugandan in 2009), they

were young men (and in the case of Bavubuka also some women) in their late teens to mid-twenties; most of them had some secondary or tertiary education, but they saw few prospects in the Ugandan job market.

Most of the young singers around that time identified as being part of the “new generation” of youthful musicians, whose music is characterised by digital production, and whose artistic identities and aspirations draw inspiration from global pop and hip-hop stars. Many actively distanced themselves from formal politics in their endeavours to frame themselves as household names and brands within imaginaries of pop stardom and global market places for cultural products. “I don’t mess with politics,” confessed one young male singer, who had been among the first music stars of the new generation in the late 1990s, and added, “I am just in music to make a living.” Many declined to speak about politics beyond generic statements, or dismissed all levels of governance, along with the international donor organisations and NGOs, as fundamentally corrupt and existing mainly for the purpose of private accumulation of funds.<sup>2</sup> Babaluku, who founded the activist hip hop collective Bavubuka, seemed to sum up this stance when, in an interview in 2006, he told me:

’Cause when I look out there, you know, the politics is not promising me much. Not anytime soon! [laughing] But when I bring back, like, the power back to myself, I can realise how many things I can change about myself. If I have that confidence to go forward—that means that the politics’s battled! ’Cause I simply do culture.

This kind of anti-political aesthetic of entrepreneurship became a distinct characteristic of the musicians who had come of age in Kampa-

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<sup>2</sup> Ciganikova (2008) discusses an apolitical civil society as one effect of the no-party “movementocracy” of the NRM government in the 1990s and early 2000s.

la in the 1990s, in the wake of decades of war and political upheaval and at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic (see also Shipley 2009).

But as the 2011 elections drew nearer in the second part of 2010, both established and aspiring musicians became participants in the election campaigns. Well-known musicians performed at presidential campaign rallies, and their recent hit songs were bought by political parties as campaign songs. Less known singers recorded songs in the hopes that they would be “picked up” by a political candidate, thereby granting the artist the opportunity to perform for large rally audiences and to be paid for their music. Young, chic R’n’B stars were selected as the faces of NGO initiatives to enhance voter participation and fair election processes. The massive presence of popular youth musicians in the campaign season was even noted by the media as a phenomenon “like never before”, as one entertainment journalist suggested to me. And if anyone doubted whether the political elite took music seriously as a way of mobilising voters, this was put to rest when President Museveni took to the stage as Sevo and released the song “You Want Another Rap?” What had prompted this shift and what would this come to mean for both music and politics in Uganda?

### **Beyond praise or protest**

Regarding the use of popular music in political elections in Africa, the pressing issue for development partners and political commentators seems to be whether the new forms of popular music and young musicians contribute to a country’s democratic development by “speaking truth to power”, or whether they reproduce repression and patrimonial political cultures by “singing the praises” of leading politicians (Akindès 2002; Künzler and Reuster-Jahn 2012; Lukalo 2006; Mwangi 2004; Ntarangwi 2009). But the role of musicians in the field of politics in twenty-first century Africa may not be that easily reduced to the idi-

oms of protest or praise (Englert 2008a, 2008b; Nyamnjoh and Fokwang 2005). Changes in leadership and policy or political culture on a national level may change the role of music and other forms of popular culture in formal politics (Schumann 2013). New media technologies and media infrastructures, along with new styles of musical expression, may create new spheres for cultural expression, or expand old ones (Englert 2008b). The actual everyday life of musicians in cities across Africa makes it difficult to sustain normative categorisations of “critical” and “uncritical” or “pro-establishment” music as analytical foundations (Englert 2008b). It would seem that the “rush towards politics” in Uganda in 2010/2011 represents a moment where the relationship between music and politics changed, and, as I will show, opened up new roles for musicians as cultural brokers in the field of politics.

But beyond what goes on in electoral campaigns, there is the question of the relational form of power in African societies. Here music and politics are related in wider political aesthetics in society, and in contests about what legitimate power is. A striking example of the ambiguous relationship between music and politics is the contradictory ways in which popular Congolese dance musicians relate to the field of politics in Kinshasa, as described by Bob White (2008). He shows that musicians “remake the world” by simultaneously avoiding politics and appropriating symbols of power; praising powerful patrons and ridiculing them for paying for praise (White 2008, 232–238, 244). But being anti-political also remakes the world, as Gavin Steingo observes about Kwaito music in South Africa. He shows how purposefully ignoring the actual material and political conditions of life can also be highly political moves, and in this way youth culture and music may open up new forms of political subjectivity (Steingo 2016). Pier (2015) writes about how traditional music in Uganda fuses traditional and neo-liberal forms of promotion in “the marketing era”. He also notes that the dynamics of the market

becomes a central cultural arena, parallel but also entwined with the political system, where traditional musicians apply for funding and develop relationships with potential patrons.

Inspired by these discussions, I seek, in this article, to frame the relationship between popular music and electoral politics in contemporary Uganda as processes that are at once political and aesthetic. As Kelly Askew's work from the Swahili coast shows, "politicizing" does not exist as an opposite to art or popular culture in many East African communities (Askew 2002, 2003). The engagement of popular music and artists in politics in Uganda cannot be understood as either praise or protest, but as more ambiguous forms of political agency concerned with crafting relationships through which artists seek to extend their influence and fame and to secure their individual as well as collective futures. I suggest that the figure of the "cultural broker" might elucidate how Ugandan artists seek to position themselves on the national political stage at election times. This may explain why popular music in the second half of the 2010s became the battleground for the future of the nation.

### **Cultural brokers on the rally platform**

Traditional music in the form of praise singing has historically been an important aspect of "welcoming" when politicians or other "big people" visit local communities in Uganda. Pier (2015, 96–99) describes how singing praises mediates between strangers, but also engineers a relationship of patronage between the "big" visitor and the singers, as well as the community that the singers represent. In other words, this traditional music practice is a kind of relational work that serves to place newcomers in a relationship of mutual exchange and dependence with the welcoming community. Following the presidential campaign along a few stops in Northern Uganda in 2011, I encountered many of these local music

groups as they performed at the NRM rallies and welcomed the President and other dignitaries to their districts and communities. I had, however, come to the rallies with a small group of young local singers from Gulu and a few national music stars from Kampala, who were performing their digitally produced pop hits from a stage adjacent to the platform for political speeches at the rally grounds. The singers who performed electronically-produced pop music were positioned differently from the welcoming groups, both in relation to the politicians and to the voters. Though they also "sang for the President", as they called it, they were not direct representatives of the communities from which the candidate was soliciting votes. Rather, their performances resembled the music variety shows that are staged when corporate sponsors and musicians collaborate to create national sponsored tours.

The singers travelled with the campaign from town to town and performed for fans-cum-voters. When both local and national stars performed digitally recorded genres of "the new generation" at grandiose political rallies across the country, it seemed that they were simply selling their songs, their products, to the highest bidder, with little regard for whether they were paid by a corporate sponsor or a political party. As one of the national stars from the central region, hired by the NRM for the President's campaign in rural areas, said: "After all, I am a business man, and there's too much money in politics." But at the same time, artists were aware that their relationships with politicians were never only market transactions. "They [NRM] know that I am popular across the country, so they bring me out to the districts that are just villages, to get the voters out," he continued. He suggested that the promise of seeing him sing mobilised his fans to participate in the rally as NRM supporters. He later added that he, of course, supported NRM politically, and hoped that this support could lead to other business opportunities in the future. At the rallies I attended, he headlined the part of the event that was organised

as a music show, where he performed a catalogue of his greatest hits from the last decade. Though the musicians of the new generation were performing music at voter rallies just like the community groups, and both types of performances were entertaining, they seemed to be doing something fundamentally different from the traditional dancers. There was an ongoing negotiation between the relationships of market transactions, voter mobilisation, and patrimonial exchange, and keeping these relationships open to constant negotiation seemed crucial.

Based on this distinction between the musical practice of welcoming and the new generation's ways of lending fame to politicians, it seems that the young musicians in political campaigns operate as a kind of intermediaries between different actors and forces, and also between different kinds of social relationships. They are cultural brokers in two senses of the word: on the one hand, they can be seen as popular intermediaries between people of different "cultures" (elite politicians and their voters); on the other, their means for brokering these social relations are cultural products, i.e., their songs, as well as their own popularity as artists, brands, and stars. However, they are not merely channels through which "culture" flows.

Recent studies of contemporary markets and networks of (informal) governance in Africa have returned to the classic anthropological figure of the broker as a starting point for analysing the agency of middlemen and intermediaries who operate in the spaces between big men, institutions, and clients (see Themnér 2012; Lindell and Utas 2012; James 2011). Revisiting older studies in political anthropology allows for a renewed focus on the political power of the broker in complex social situations (Boissevain 1974, 148; Geertz 1960; Wolf 1956).<sup>3</sup> The figure of the broker and cultural brokerage as practice, I suggest, is central to understanding how the negotiations

of young musicians take on political value, as well as the rise of musicians as political actors in Uganda.

In this view, a broker is an intermediary that not only connects otherwise unrelated actors, but also wrings from these relations a profit or reward, and not necessarily in the form of money. Thus, brokers can become rather powerful actors with the possibility of redirecting flows of value within certain networks. James (2011) analyses brokers of land in the context of rapid transition in South Africa, where elements of state, market, and patrimonial or patriarchal-style political authority intersect. Here, the broker emerges as a somewhat morally ambiguous figure with the capability to "cobble together a collection of divergent discourses and practices, both for their own profit and to deliver a series of (...) resources to his clients" (James 2011, 327). Pursuing this complex cobbling further, James describes the work of brokers as a form of synthesis, where the broker is one who activates a continuous interplay between what are otherwise irreconcilable discourses and practices (James 2011, 335). James' characterisation of new forms of brokerage in South Africa resonates with Ulf Hannerz's seminal study of urban politics (Hannerz 1980). As he notes, in relationships,

"a patron can get what he wants from someone else only by using his own resources, and there are limits to those. A broker can deal in promises to use his influence with a patron, but it is generally understood that he cannot always come through. In a sense, then, his funds are unlimited, as he is less likely to be held responsible for broken promises." (Hannerz 1980, 171).

Consequently, inserting brokers into a network of exchange can expand the reach of a network, partly by making the promises of political mobilisation and support vaguer and less explicit. But the ties of the network are

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<sup>3</sup> See also Lindquist (2015) for an excellent review.

altered by this, as brokers are wedged in between parties of mutual exchange, and this opens the relationships in the network to a range of possible manipulations. That is, the success of the broker relies on the separation of patron and client (see Steiner 1990, 45). New forms of ambiguity take up space within networks of political exchange.

Brokerage, in this way, like the welcoming practices of traditional music groups in Uganda, is a kind of relational work. But where welcoming is about creating relationships of direct exchange, brokerage is about distancing and the re-direction of flows of value and a simultaneous synthesis across this distance. For the singers I worked with in Uganda, cultural brokerage involves a kind of relational hustling that requires a measure of ambiguity in order to work. In the following I unfold three cases where the relationship between popular music and politics was put at stake in election campaigns in 2011, 2016 and towards the 2021 elections, and show how these ambiguities seem to be central to artists' working as cultural brokers in the field of politics.

### Who cooks and who eats?

While Uganda's President rapped in the NRM campaign song for 2011, a very different kind of president and his family of musicians were preparing for the elections too. His Excellency Ghetto President Bobi Wine and the Firebase Crew had for more than ten years been one of the most popular music crews in Kampala, known for their dancehall-inspired anti-establishment image and sound. In his hit songs, Bobi Wine had criticised corruption and self-interest among the country's leaders, as well as social problems, claiming to speak for "the Ghetto People". When Bobi Wine started using the title Ghetto President in the middle of the 2000s, others were quick to pick it up, and it soon became an engrained part of his image. The members of the Firebase Crew were appointed ministers of the Ghetto Gov-

ernment. The Firebase Ghetto Government mirrored the national political structure as a pop-cultural, subversive formation, with humorous yet poignant critique. On the outskirts of the gentrifying Kamwokya slum the crew had its meeting place, the Firebase Ghetto. It was next door to one of the successful music studios in town, Dream Studios. Bobi Wine's elder brother, Eddy Yawe, was the owner and leading producer of the studio. Several of their siblings (there are ten of them altogether), who owned the land along Old Kira Road, were involved with Firebase Crew, as were cousins and other family members. The eldest of the siblings, Fred, had been Local Councillor 1 (LC1) in the area for so long that everyone just called him "Chairman". On the block that was the home of the Firebase Crew, the Ghetto Government was closely connected to the Ugandan government through kin relations of the brothers. When Eddy Yawe ran for parliament in 2011, musicians brokered between networks of kinship, music, and fandom to mobilise political support, and the power of the Ghetto Government extended itself beyond the music industry.

While a number of musicians recorded new songs or used their existing hit catalogue to support specific political candidates, Ghetto President Bobi Wine prepared for the 2010 elections by releasing a song speaking to the wider context of the electoral process and democracy. The song, "Obululu" ('Votes'), urges listeners not to let political allegiances uproot social unity and peace in Uganda, as they had in the 2007 elections in Kenya. This more general support for a peaceful election also seemed to be the meta-message when Bobi Wine and his long-standing musical rival, Chameleone, performed together at the "Battle of the Champions" concert, which was supported, in part, by the Ugandan Electoral Commission. Yet the Firebase Crew also performed at the pre-nomination youth rally where President Museveni unveiled his rap song. Lastly, the Ghetto President publicly endorsed his brothers' candidacies for office and

campaigned for them, though they were running for two different party platforms. Especially in the parliamentary campaign of Eddy Yawe, Bobi Wine's presence was effective in mobilising support at rallies and other events. On one of these occasions I asked one of the younger brothers in the family, who was not a singer, about what it meant that Bobi Wine was participating in his brother's campaign. "A lot", he said, "cause you know, Eddy Yawe is this gentleman. You see?" pointing and dusting off the imaginary sleeves of an imaginary suit. "Bobi Wine can bring out the ghetto youth. Guys my age. Like, all the people you see here, they are ghetto people. Office guys don't have time to come out for this." As a pop star and brand, the Ghetto President commanded an urban constituency of fans. As he lent his fame to his gentleman brother, their family ties became connections that mobilised significant popular political support for Eddy Yawe's run for office.

Eddy Yawe was running for the parliamentary seat of Kampala Central for the Democratic Party (DP), an opposition party strong in the capital area. Many wondered if Eddy Yawe was a joker in the race because of his profession. How could he be serious? Musicians, with their image as thugs (*bayaye*), were known to be uneducated, and to spend all their wealth on parties and women, rather than on respectable endeavours. But Eddy claimed respectability through his music as well as through his family history. Eddy Yawe never identified himself as part of the Firebase Crew, though most of their songs had been recorded in his studio by his resident producers. He characterised his own music as "soft music", taking up the legacy of East African jazz and rumba, and considered it to be more respectable, and belonging to a different, more mature generation, than the digitally produced beats of his younger brothers. He performed on a regular basis with Uganda's longest running Afro-jazz/rumba band, Afrigo Band, and argued that while the Firebase crew and their dancehall beats and lyrics might appeal to the

ghetto youths, his music addressed a more general audience with positive and uplifting messages. Eddy explained that his political affiliation with the Democratic Party was founded on his kinship relations. His paternal grandfather had been a central player in the party when it was founded. His own father and uncles had subsequently been involved in the party. His father, a veterinarian, had been district chairman of the Democratic Party during the Bush War (1980–1986) in the rural area where the family land lay. During that time, he and his family had been the target of political violence and extortion because of sympathies between the Democratic Party and the rebels in the National Resistance Army (later the National Resistance Movement) trying to take over the country.

In his public speeches, Eddy Yawe emphasised himself as an entrepreneur, and, in that sense, part of the new generation in the Ugandan music industry. In his BA and MA degrees, both from universities abroad, he had focused on sound engineering, and he spoke of his success as an entrepreneur and business owner. This success had led to the construction of his mansion on one of Kampala's hilltops. He was to be a "projects MP", who developed the talents of the youths in the city to create development and wealth for all. Eddy Yawe's campaign in this way demonstrates the kind of cultural brokerage involved in the new roles of popular musicians in Ugandan politics, as they extend their fame beyond the music industry. The artists and celebrities in Uganda were beginning to have the same material properties as the more traditional elites. They built mansions and drove cars way more extravagant than any politician; they owned businesses, as well as the means for the production of their "bigness" – studios and concert grounds. Although Yawe and his brothers had a history with the political elite of Uganda through their kinship relations, they did not primarily make claims to power through these. Their father attended some rallies and functions, but both Eddy Yawe and Bobi Wine emphasised

how it was their individual talents as artists which had made their names, which in turn had gained them the cars, mansions, and other status symbols. They were contributing to society not through their family names, but by their talents and entrepreneurship, by making their names as artists.

Eddy told me that his political ambitions were not only related to his family background, but also to his profession. He remarked that musicians had so far been considered only as entertainers in formal politics, but his candidacy changed this dynamic:

A maid, or a house girl, would be expected to cook, but not expected to be found at the dining [table] eating with the boss. So, at the time of eating, musicians are not always welcome. They are supposed to campaign for politicians, they are supposed to make drama for the politicians. (...) Then we are good for nothing in society. That's why I come out as a musician to run for an important post in the society. And when I run, I am showing these guys that we are not only good for preparing food. But we are also good for dining with you.

Eddy used eating as an idiom for political power to point to his ambition to change the established position of musicians.<sup>4</sup> Conventionally, singers were in politics to produce songs that carried messages contributing to the bigness and drama of politicians. But a musician running for political office changes this scenario. Eddy used his name in music to step out of the kitchen and up to the dining table, where “the national cake” was being served (see Médard 1992; Chabal and Daloz 1999, 159; Daloz 2003). He repositioned himself from being someone who contributes to the bigness of others – someone who cooks but does not eat – to being someone who can be big himself, some-

one who eats at the dining table. This musician appeared to be neither protesting against the “corrupted” older generation nor singing their praises in order to be their client. He was trying to make connections, to extend his sphere of influence, by seeking to become complicit in the field of politics while keeping his status as an artist. By also sitting at the dining table and eating the food served there, artists would grow bigger; they would extend themselves beyond the kitchen, where power is cooked. The high turnout and extravagant ambience of Eddy Yawe’s rallies were reported in the papers and on the television news. Based on the rallies and other public events, Eddy seemed to be leading the race. However, he did not win the Kampala Central seat in 2011, according to some, due to electoral fraud.

### **Artists at the dinner table: Tubonga Nawe**

During election campaigns President Museveni has become known for establishing direct patronage with strategically important groups of voters in both city and rural areas as a means of securing loyalty and legitimacy (Goodfellow and Titeca 2012; Kjær and Therkildsen 2013). While other groups in society were rewarded publicly for their support in 2011 (Asimwe 2010), and were shielded by the President’s intervening hand in policy-making, artists seemed not to be given the same deal. Rather, they worked as individual entrepreneurs, making individual deals. Furthermore, while politicians might consider their handing over of money to artists as a donation or a gift in exchange for loyalty and praise, the artists themselves considered this money as payment for services rendered in the form of performances and songs. And so, it seemed, artists in the 2011 campaigns were not so much out to build patron-client relations of exchange with politicians, as they were trying to work on politicians as connections to something more, brokering themselves and their songs as cul-

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<sup>4</sup> See more on the “Politics of the Belly” in Bayart (1993).

tural products. Framing exchanges with politicians in terms of market relations allowed singers to separate their political allegiances and debts from the products and services they had to offer. This kind of mutual hustling going on between musicians and politicians kept the nature of these relations ambiguous – and a little mysterious – and the uncertainties were exactly what made them work.

In the campaigns leading up to the 2016 elections, a campaign song and a dinner party made the community of musicians, as well as the public, question the new roles of musicians in formal politics. In October 2015, an event was held at one of Kampala's resorts to launch the campaign song of NRM and President Museveni. The song, "Tubonga Nawe" ('We Are With You'), was recorded by an all-star cast of Ugandan musicians and praised the President and NRM for the development of Uganda over the last thirty years. At the launch the artists hosted the President and his wife, as well as the press, for dinner. In his speech at this event, Museveni made a commitment to give 400 million Uganda shillings to a fund to develop the music industry, and the Tubonga Nawe singers officially received this money as representatives of the industry. The musicians thanked the President for his work and his support by kneeling before him, an action of deference and respect. Several of the participating artists took part in the national campaign by performing at rallies across the country.

The song and its public launch sparked intense discussions among musicians as well as their fans. Should musicians make more demands from politicians, for instance that they should enforce copyright laws, so that musicians can receive payment for their songs? Or should they use their fame to raise political awareness about social problems and political injustice? Were these musicians paid by the NRM to sing, or were they truly supporting the President? Fans wrote angry and disappointed comments on their idols' Facebook pages. Some media outlets suggested that the

artists were "ticking" around the President, comparing them to bloodsucking parasites. In the many comments in both printed and online media, journalists described the effect of Tubonga Nawe as a "backlash" against the participating musicians.

The Tubonga Nawe dinner somewhat resembled a traditional welcoming ceremony, as described above, in which a group representing a community sings the praises of a visitor, as a way of establishing a mutual bond of patronage. But the new generation of stars in Uganda had established themselves as "names" in Ugandan society with the image of being independent of the established political elite. When they directly praised and knelt before the President, the ambiguities that allowed for multiple interpretations of their actions on the political scene were closed off. The Tubonga Nawe song rather unequivocally linked musicians and NRM in a patron-client relationship, especially as it was accompanied by the public display of exchange between the President and the artists in the form of food and money, traditional political currencies in Uganda. Moving from the roles of cultural brokers, connecting politicians and voters for a profit, into roles of clients, I suggest, is one of the reasons that the singers participating in the project faced such harsh criticism.

Chameleone, arguably the most popular musician of his generation, commented on the public disapproval that he and his colleagues met. As he was quoted in one of the online tabloids, defending his independence as an artist: "As a musician, I have spent 15 years singing about the problems in this country and I sing them as Jose Chameleone. (...) Don't say that I betrayed you, you have never sent me. Am not a politician, I have just told you the side am on" (Walter 2015). Musicians did not want to be framed as praise singers and dupes, repeating the political agenda fed to them by a patron. Yet they also refused to have to answer to "the people" for their actions. Chameleone's statement exemplifies the new generation of artists, and the kind of relational hustling that

artists must master when they operate between music and politics. They are attempting to be recognised as the entrepreneurs and stars of their generation, while at the same time seeking to avoid the burdensome relations of obligation that the field of formal politics seems to entail. But dining with politicians might take the legitimacy of their cultural brokerage off the table.

His Excellency Ghetto President Bobi Wine did not participate in the Tubonga Nawe song, and stuck to his earlier strategy of speaking to Ugandan voters' sense of national unity. A week after the controversial song's release, he posted on Facebook: "[D]on't allow this whole election process to divide you because it's only periodical; it will soon end and we shall still stick together as Ugandans." Closer to the election date, he released the song "Dembe" ('Peace'), urging voters and candidates to keep the peace and respect the electoral process in the coming elections. Some listeners speculated that lines in the song that criticised politicians who "overstay" in power were directed at President Museveni, but the artist himself insisted on the song's overall message of peaceful politics. But other artists were more directly reproachful towards Tubonga Nawe. Bana Mutibwa, who had been one of the young rappers in Buvubuka, recorded a direct reply to the NRM praise song, entitled "Tetubonga Nawe" ('We Are Not With You') (Walter 2015). In the song Bana Mutibwa criticised both the NRM and the artists featured in the Tubonga Nawe song in harsh terms. The song spread across social media after the presidential candidate for the opposition party, FDC, shared it on Facebook. Bana was now living abroad, but suddenly found himself to be a name on the Ugandan music scene, appearing in newspaper articles and on online gossip pages. Encouraged by the reception of the protest song, Bana recorded several other tracks with critical messages calling for political change. His friends worried that he was too outspoken in his lyrics, but to the artist himself it seemed that if some

musicians could sing the praises of politicians, others had to speak up and protest. Thus the Tubonga Nawe song and the backlash against the participating artists point to the limits of the ambiguous political agency of the new generation of popular singers in Uganda. They underline the difficulty and intricacy of cultural brokerage when singers step up to the dinner table of national politics.

## The Ghetto President for President

In early 2017 a parliamentary seat opened up in Kyadondo East and Bobi Wine ran as an independent candidate, against two established party politicians, and won overwhelmingly with a campaign based largely on social media, WhatsApp groups, Twitter, and Facebook. He very quickly became the most visible and outspoken opposition politician in Parliament and beyond, mobilising a large number of followers and international media on Twitter and Facebook. And his stance was clear: he was not a politician, but had come to politics as a musician to represent the young generation, the Ugandans whose interests were being ignored by the government. When the political platform People Power – Our Power formed around his candidacy, it was not a political party but a movement. In this way, the Ghetto President insisted on his integrity as an artist, but this also drew the music industry into politics in ways that made music the battleground for the future of the country.

I visited old friends in the Firebase Crew on the outskirts of the Kampala slum Kamwokya in January 2019. "The ghetto is quiet," says John, who apart from being Bobi's younger brother, had also become his manager. "Since August we are not working!" Bobi Wine had, over the past few months, been shot at (killing his driver), arrested, and tortured; charged with treason and had the charges dropped; and blocked from hosting concerts and performing at shows by the Ugandan police, military, and state agents (The Observer

2018; The East African 2018). Promoters had stopped calling when Bobi Wine and the crew were stopped from performing, either by presence of military police, or by promoters having their police security clearance for events revoked. “And now this new act...” John continues. He shows me on the phone. The Stage Plays and Public Entertainments Act Cap 49 is a colonial law from 1943, largely not enacted since. In late 2018, the act was taken up again for revision. It requires all performing artists, all artistic works, and all venues to be registered centrally, and that one must have a license in order to be allowed to perform. It stipulates that all creative works must be submitted for review and control by a centralised body and that recording a music video will require an application, reinstalling the “Censorship Board” of high colonialism. Further, the Act placed a limit on the number of performances allowed per artist per day, and also set rules on how artists are allowed to dress and speak, and for how long they are allowed to perform. On Facebook, the act was called “the Anti-Bobi Wine Act”.

President Museveni and the NRM had earlier introduced a “social media tax” – a daily fee to access social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook, which came in to effect in 2018. Officially its purpose was to keep Ugandans from being idle and gossiping. In reality the Internet had several times been shut down during times of political tension and elections, and this too was understood as a means to suppress freedom of expression and political mobilisation for poor Ugandans. Bobi Wine was central in the demonstrations against the tax.<sup>5</sup> While controlling the public sphere in Uganda by means of shutdowns and legislation is not new (Brisset-Foucault 2019), these attempts to control digital space and the production of music point to how the site of political contest has shifted into the music industry.

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<sup>5</sup> The tax is still in effect, but since 2014 the prices on data have dropped considerably (around 4 EUR for 1 GB data).

As John and I sat in the *kafunda* and sipped sodas, he returned to his phone and found the right link on Facebook: a livestream from a concert in Jamaica where both Buju Banton and Bobi Wine were performing. Hundreds of comments, likes, and loves from Ugandan viewers popped up as we watched. Global media like CNN and AlJazeera started reporting on the Ghetto President’s rise as an artist-activist, and he was named among Time Magazine’s 100 Next influential people in the world in 2019 (Baker 2019).

Musicians in both Kampala and across regional towns in Uganda joined the People Power Movement, wearing red, and, like Bobi Wine, releasing songs and mobilising rallies. When Bobi Wine was arrested (or kidnapped) and tortured in August 2018, Lucky David, a popular artist in the regional town of Gulu, immediately recorded the song “Free Bobi Wine”, showing Lucky in a northern Ugandan landscape, appealing for the release of the MP: “Dear President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni. We the youth of Northern Uganda. We are begging you to release our president the Ghetto President his excellence Bobi Wine”. The song circulated through Whatsapp groups and the video was shared on Facebook.

But being part of People Power had consequences for the entertainment scene in Gulu. Sitting in the shielded privacy of his small two-room house on the outskirts of town, Lucky told me: “That song [Free Bobi Wine] was very bad for me. This Christmas I didn’t work. I booked no shows, because you know, promoters they fear.” I asked, “So why did you release it?”

Nanna, we want change! Are you going to stand with the people or are you going to take money? You know, they buy artists, give them money to stop what they are doing, and now sing for NRM. Like the Bebe Cools. You’ll get money but you’ll lose the love of the crowd. (...) Now I am not working, but when I am doing very badly, I can call People Pow-

er and they send me some little money.

So now Lucky David – being engaged with “campaigning” for the Ghetto President and participating in the social media campaigns to reach youths in Northern Uganda – had made himself a mouthpiece for People Power. In turn, his recordings and music videos are paid for by his connections in Kampala – “everything, they take care of”. But he was worried too. He worried that by losing his position as an entrepreneur-artist, he would lose his livelihood. That he was now dependent on the patronage of an anti-politician, the Ghetto President, and his non-party People Power.

During the course of 2019, NRM tried new strategies to silence the musician-activists, seemingly with a keen understanding of the relational hustling of brokerage and of ways to undermine it. In the second half of 2019, a number of national stars, both singers and celebrities, who had supported People Power, were in the news because they had turned their political allegiance to Museveni and NRM. In videos on Whatsapp and Youtube they spoke about how they had been invited to meet the President and how they had received large gifts of money (Lucima and Wandera 2020). At a big event in October, the NRM and Museveni revealed former Firebase Crew member and singer Buchaman (aka Mark Bugembe) as Presidential Envoy for Ghetto and Kampala Youth Affairs (Malaba 2019).

In Gulu, Lucky David and other singers who had supported People Power also started getting calls to “meet the President”. One singer who had received several invitations to visits of this kind, and felt increasingly threatened, told me that there was no option. He would have to accept the invitation, as well as whatever money he would be offered during the visit. If he refused, he doubted that the People Power Movement would rescue him from jail or pay his medical bills when, as he said, “agents of NRM increase the pressure on me”, or, if he was kidnapped and killed, as others

had been, that they would support his family. “I am in a fix,” he said, “there is no direction where I can move.” Not long after, images of the singer shaking Museveni’s hand, and rumours of the big payment he had received to switch sides, circulated on social media and in the national press.

Musicians came to change how politics is done in Uganda, but the music industry was transformed by politics as well. While the Ghetto President continued to broker his artist identity through digital connections to fans, and to a more and more global public, musicians were increasingly forced into patron-client relations with either People Power or the State. Leading up to the 2021 elections, more musicians declared their candidacy for political office, and the People Power Movement launched as a political party, the National Unity Party (NUP) (Burke 2020).

## Turning tables in Ugandan politics

Young musicians in Uganda seek to make a name for themselves within the tensions of the market, kinship networks, and political patronage in practices of cultural brokerage. Seeing artists as cultural brokers in the political field allows a close focus on the relational work of power and on how the sites of this work are being changed by digital media and popular music culture in Uganda. I have here offered to the study of African politics an ethnographic investigation of youth’s experiments with “worlding” (Simone 2001) power in new ways, but also pointed to the limitations of these experiments.

The fault lines in Ugandan politics now have popular music and young musicians at the centre. How Ugandans are allowed to connect among themselves and with the outside world, and what kinds of “bigness” and power are legitimate political currencies are at stake in the shifting relations between popular music and formal politics.

President Museveni’s rap song cemented

the way that the political elite sees music genres usually associated with urban youth culture as potential pathways to reach voters in ways that conventional campaign strategies cannot. But the relationship between popular musicians, their songs, and politicians cannot be reduced to relations of patronage or co-optation. My interlocutors entered the political scene from different vantage points and with different ambitions. What they seemed to have in common was an insistence on not committing to conventional patronage relations, but rather on keeping the nature of their engagement more open to interpretation.

The notion of cultural brokerage offers a way of understanding the plural strategies and often ambiguous actions of the new generation of Ugandan musicians on the political scene. It highlights the intense relational work required to make the collaborations between musicians and politicians work into credible and legitimate interactions in public life. The synthesis that performances and strategies of

singers might effect is created in the ambiguous interplay between divergent frames of interpretation, in the same way as an oppositional political movement or a potential presidential candidate.

In May 2020 Jose Chameleone announced his candidacy for Mayorship of the capital Kampala as an independent, while also being spotted at Democratic Party events and wearing a red People Power beret. Questioned about his political integrity after supporting NRM in Tubonga Nawe, he insisted on his entrepreneurial independence as an artist: “[I]t is a job. Just like other companies hire me for gigs, that is how that thing happened. Just because I provided a service does not mean I belong there or not” (Nakazibwe and Bamulanzeki 2020). The mercurial, trickster-like cultural broker continues to attempt to expand his connections without being tied down; and for those with a big enough following of fan-voters it may be possible to turn the tables on Ugandan politics.

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