

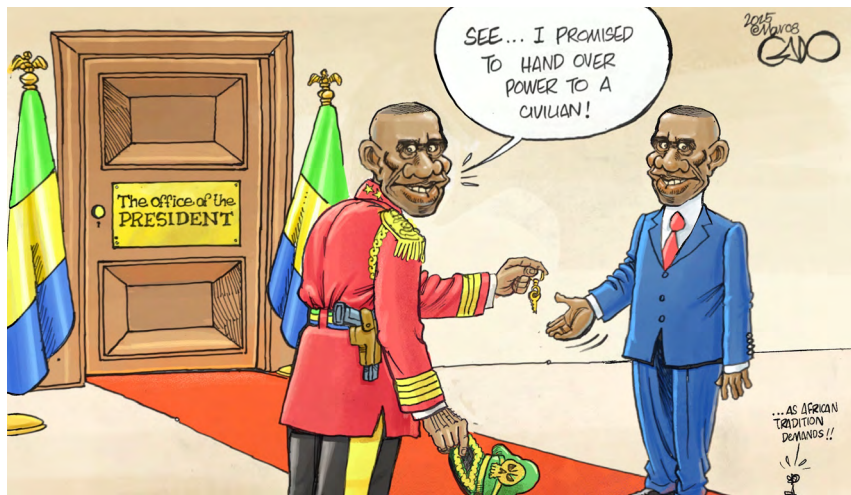
The Continent



**Tigray waits for
another war**

TPLF

PRETORIA
ACCORD



Gabonese leader General Brice Oligui Nguema, who came to power in a 2023 coup, will run in next month's presidential election.

GENOCIDE

Sudan takes on UAE at The Hague

In Sudan's civil war, the United Arab Emirates has picked a side. It has been supporting – with weapons and money – the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the paramilitary group that is fighting the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) for control of the country. But the SAF has been making military gains recently, and is fighting on other fronts too. It has launched a case against the UAE at the International Court of Justice, accusing the Gulf state of aiding and abetting an alleged genocide by the RSF in Darfur. The UAE has dismissed the allegations as a “cynical publicity stunt”.

BOTSWANA

Less radical De Beers deal inked

Botswana has renewed its Debswana partnership with De Beers mining company, extending it by 25 years. Both parties seemed happy with the 50/50 mining partnership but disagreed on its sales arrangement which allowed the government to independently sell only 25% of the diamonds Debswana mines. When the previous agreement expired, former president Mokgweetsi Masisi delayed renewal as he negotiated to increase this to 50%. But the new deal signed by President Duma Boko increases it to 30% now, with a conditional gradual rise to 40% by 2035.

NIGERIA

Senate misses its #MeToo moment

Last week, Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan accused one of Nigeria's most prominent politicians of sexual harassment. She said that the harassment by Senate President Godswill Akpabio had been accompanied by attempts to silence her. Akpabio has denied the allegations. This week, a senate ethics committee took action – not against the alleged perpetrator, but against Akpoti-Uduaghan. She has been suspended for six months, and locked out of her official office. First lady Oluremi Tinubu has applauded the senate for “doing the needful”.



Sexual harassment: Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan has been punished for calling out the senate leader for allegedly harassing her

DRC

M23 accused of forced conscription

About 70,000 people have fled eastern DRC to Burundi in the weeks since Rwanda-backed M23 fighters seized the cities of Goma and Bukavu. Many are risking their lives trying to swim or ride makeshift rafts across the Rusizi river, a natural border between the two countries. Among them are men who told the *BBC* that they are terrified of living in M23 occupied territory because the rebels are forcefully conscripting Congolese citizens into their ranks.

AID FREEZE

Lesotho won't engage, escalate, or feed Trump drama

United States President Donald Trump said that he was ending an \$8-million grant to promote LGBTQIA+ rights in “Lesotho, which nobody has ever heard of”. Asked by *GroundUp* to comment, Lesotho's foreign minister pointed out that the grants came through negotiated agreements. But he said Lesotho would not take any action if the US unilaterally ended the contracts. Such action, said Lejone Mpotjoane, “could drag us into disputes with someone who deliberately wants to drag us into the mud” and “could be a waste of time for us”.

RWANDA

On second thought, cough up that cash

Kigali says that it will now demand a \$64-million payment waived last year when the UK scrapped its plans to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. This comes after the UK decided to pause some aid to Rwanda, over the latter's support of M23 rebels in eastern DRC. On X, Rwanda spokesperson Yolande Makolo, who called Britain's recent action "inflammatory", said Rwanda had waived the \$64-million payment on the basis of trust, at London's request. She argued the UK's measures against Rwanda had violated that trust.



Shake down: Former UK prime minister Rishi Sunak meets Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda. Photo: Alice Hodgson/No. 10 Downing Street

GHANA

Aboard the anti-gay train we go again

Ten legislators have resubmitted a proposed homophobic law that failed when it was first pushed. The Bill seeks to impose a five year jail term for identifying as LGBTQIA+ and criminalise related human rights advocacy. Former president Nana Akufo-Addo did not sign it into law after Parliament passed it in 2024, hurting his party in the December polls. President John Mahama supported it, and now has to walk the tightrope between domestic populism and liberal international funders who underwrite Ghana's debt-burdened economy.

TUNISIA

Stranded migrants rescued from oil rig

A group of at least 30 people, among them two children, who were stranded atop an oil rig off the coast of Tunisia, have been rescued. A reconnaissance flight by Sea Watch, a charity organisation, spotted the group perched on the Miskar oil platform, with a dinghy floating nearby, *Reuters* reported. They are believed to have fled Libya, where the government recently discovered at least 70 bodies in two mass graves, highlighting the brutality migrants suffered on land at the hands of traffickers and authorities in transit countries.



There's the door: President Umaro Sissoco Embaló made his feelings on Ecowas clear

GUINEA-BISSAU

Ecowas team beats hasty retreat citing presidential threat

A delegation from the West African regional bloc Ecowas hastily left Guinea-Bissau on Sunday, saying the President Umaro Sissoco Embaló had threatened to kick them out anyway. They were in the country to negotiate an election impasse. Embaló, whose first term ended last week, plans to run again in postponed elections initially scheduled for last November. Relying on a Supreme Court ruling, he will stay until September at least. Embaló has already survived two coup attempts and dissolved the opposition-majority Parliament in his first five years.

RÉUNION

Cyclone leaves havoc in its wake

At least four people were killed and hundreds of thousands left without water or electricity when Cyclone Garance hit Réunion, a French territory in the Indian Ocean, located between Madagascar and Mauritius. The cyclone hit the archipelago on 28 February with winds exceeding 200 km/h, causing flooding, mudslides and property damage. Garance is the strongest storm to hit the islands since 1989's Cyclone Firinga. France has sent aid, including 200 firefighters and relief workers.

SOUTH SUDAN

Veep's home under siege by state forces

Government soldiers surrounded the home of Vice President Riek Machar in the capital Juba on Wednesday, a day after his key ally, army chief General Gabriel Duop Lam, was arrested. Another Machar loyalist, Petroleum Minister Puot Kang Chol, was also detained with his family and bodyguards. This week's escalations happened after an armed group allied to Machar stormed an army base in the country's north. But they fit in the pattern of a years-long prickly stalemate between Salva Kiir and Machar who only begrudgingly share power.

Mozambique

Children killed in attack on Mondlane

The condition of the opposition leader himself remains unknown.

Luis Nhachote in Maputo

Hours before Mozambique's new president signed a pact designed to soothe post-election unrest, unidentified gunmen attacked the country's most prominent opposition leader.

Venâncio Mondlane's convoy was shot at on Wednesday in Hulene, Expresso, on the outskirts of Maputo. The incident, which happened just 7km from the Ponta Vermelha Palace where President Daniel Chapo resides, was broadcast live on Venâncio Mondlane's Facebook page.

The video shows people running away, sandals abandoned in the middle of the road and the bloodied face of one of Mondlane's aides. Two children were reportedly killed and 16 people injured.

Antonieta Maculuve, a Mondlane supporter who was at the scene, told *The Continent*: "It was an attack, an

assassination attempt, an ambush".

Mondlane's team said gunmen emerged from two armoured vehicles and six Mahindras – the Indian car brand often associated with Mozambican police.

Mondlane fled the scene. It is not clear where he is at present.

Nine hours later, President Chapo signed a deal with nine other opposition leaders pledging political commitment to an inclusive national dialogue. Mondlane was not invited to the talks, despite being the most prominent opposition leader.

Analysts don't expect the deal to work. "Whether we like it or not, without Venâncio Mondlane this is a joke," said Baltazar Fael, a researcher at the Centre for Public Integrity, days before the agreement was signed.

Mondlane claims to have won the presidential election in October 2024. Although election observers raised concerns about the credibility of the results, the electoral commission awarded the victory to Chapo, the ruling Frelimo party candidate. Mondlane has been co-ordinating popular resistance ever since, returning from temporary exile in January.

Last week, the mayor of Vilanculos municipality, a member of the Renamo opposition party, handed Mondlane the keys to the city. It was his first public recognition by an authority figure. ■

South Africa

Call me by *her* name

Two men are suing the state in a bid to force its bureaucracy into closer alignment with its values.

Kiri Rupiah in Johannesburg

When a woman marries a man in South Africa, she automatically gets her husband's surname – unless she requests otherwise. A man cannot take his wife's surname – not even to add it to his own for a new surname that hyphenates both.

That's unconstitutional, argued the lawyers representing two men from the city of Bloemfontein who tried to take on their spouses' names, only to be refused by home affairs officials.

One wanted to take his wife's surname, the other tried to register a double-barrelled surname combining his and hers. Home affairs refused to do so, citing the Births and Deaths Registration Act of 1992 which specifies name-change procedures only for married and divorced women.

The Bloemfontein high court previously ruled for the men, saying the law discriminated against them on the basis of gender and was unconstitutional. But the court order will only take effect if it is confirmed by the Constitutional Court, which heard the case on Tuesday.

Speaking to *The Continent*, professor Pierre de Vos of the University of Cape Town said the court will almost certainly confirm that the act, a product of patriarchal attitudes that position men as household heads, is discriminatory.

The Constitutional Court might order that the provisions of the birth and registration act that are now being applied only to women immediately also apply to men too. But it could also require Parliament to produce its own amendment which would have to treat men and women equally.

Meanwhile, in the United States, married women may come to regret taking their husbands' names at all. A new bill, proposed by a Republican lawmaker, aims to require extra documentation from voters to prove their citizenship: passports, birth certificate, or naturalisation papers.

The Pew Research Centre estimates that as many as 69-million women voters who adopted their husbands' names would find it harder to prove their identity as their documents might not bear the same names. ■

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One day in Mekelle

Photo: Michele Spatari/AFP

*The conflict in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region was one of the deadliest wars of this century. Estimates vary, but as many as half a million people died in just two years. The civil war pitted forces loyal to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed against those answering to Tigray's regional leadership. It ended with a ceasefire in November 2022. But Tigray's leaders are now divided between those who want to co-operate with the federal government and those who do not. These divisions could shatter a very fragile peace. In Tigray's capital Mekelle, **Zeywegih Leyti*** describes what it feels like to wait for another war.*

This morning, I wake up early, and I go to a nearby cafe for breakfast. Everyone is talking about politics.

Kalkidan, the cafe owner, says to me: “Hey, Zeywegih! What is happening? I can’t focus. Is it really that war will erupt again? Are we going to suffer again from drone raids? Shall I withdraw my money from the bank? What shall I do?”

Another customer, a middle-aged man, said: “All this should be a dream. In the past we fought with external enemies. Now with whom are we going to fight? If a single bullet is fired, it would be civil war.”

I don’t have any answers for them.

After eating my breakfast – fata, a spicy tomato stew, and coffee – I go to the bank to withdraw money for my sister’s wedding. It is full of other people withdrawing all their money. I line up and wait my turn.

Half an hour later, the bank guards inform us that there is no more cash in the branch, and we should wait until more arrives. I don’t feel like waiting.

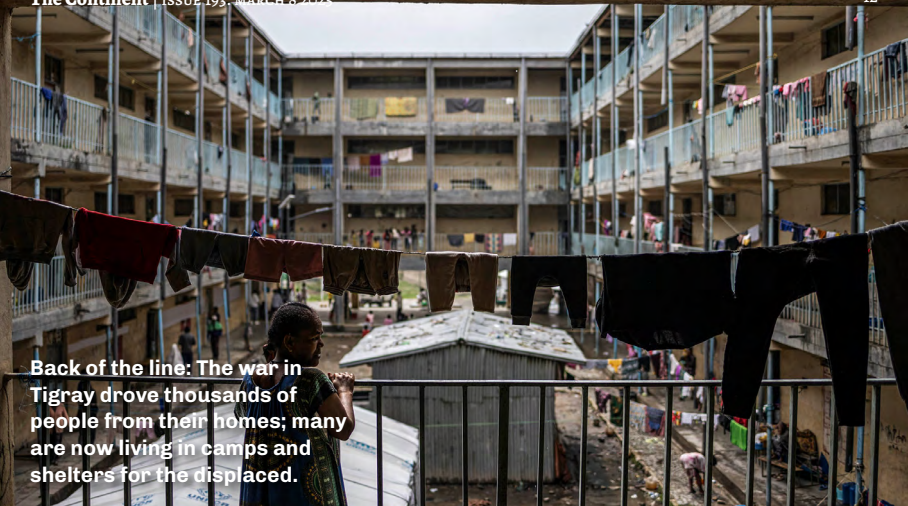
The worry, the uncertainty, the fear: it all feels like what it felt like before the outbreak of the last war, in 2020. There were cash shortages then, too; and the price of food started to skyrocket.

Food is getting expensive again, especially teff, which we use to make injera. There are lines outside all the banks, but bank officials can’t explain why. They tell us that the banking system is down, or the ATMs are broken. No one is convinced.

From what we hear, it is the same all over Tigray. A friend called me from Adwa last month. “How is everything in Mekelle?” he said. “Here in Adwa, people are queuing in the banks to withdraw all

Tensions rise: People in Mekelle watch a speech of Debretsion Gebremichael, president of Tigray’s pre-war government.
Photo: Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP





Back of the line: The war in Tigray drove thousands of people from their homes; many are now living in camps and shelters for the displaced.

their money.” He said that the situation is even worse in rural areas, where farmers are waiting outside cereal mills for weeks at a time.

As a Tigrayan freedom fighter who took up a gun for the cause of Tigray’s freedom, I was motivated by a sense of obligation to safeguard helpless Tigrayans, particularly farmers. My comrades and I made huge sacrifices and endured much pain for a cause we believed in. But I do not wish to return to a senseless war.

I don’t want to see history repeat itself. I lost many friends in the war. Thousands of women and girls were raped. I know some of them. Clinics and schools were destroyed and have yet to be rebuilt.

I remember everything vividly, to this day. The shadow of the war is everywhere.

I hope for a future where peace prevails, where displaced people can return to their homes, where children attend school, and where health centres



In memoriam: A picture of a deceased combatant hangs on a tent at the Maweini camp for internally displaced people. Photos: Michele Spatari/AFP

are able to provide medical services to those in need. A future where youth can work without the fear of war and conscription, without having to contemplate a perilous migration.

I wish for the people of Tigray to live



Life still happens: A man takes a bite of a pastry on the streets of Mekelle, Ethiopia.

Photo: Amanuel Sileshi/AFP

their lives in peace, without fear.

That future feels far away. In the early evening, I go to Kebele 16, a bustling district in the centre of the city. I have coffee in a restaurant that doubles as a bingo hall. Young men sit next to me, debating their own futures.

“Are we bound for war?”

“Where shall we go to be safe?”

“This is not fair.”

Everyone is talking about the leadership rift between the old guard of the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front and the interim administration, which was installed after the 2022 peace agreement.

There are rumours that the old guard is considering an alliance with Eritrea – the same Eritrea that sent its soldiers to kill and rape us in the last war.

Later that night, my father calls me and asks: “Are you coming home?” No, I say – I’ll see you tomorrow. He is also worried,

and so is the rest of the family. We should all be talking about my sister’s wedding. Instead, the talk is of war.

I end the night with a walk up to Abreha Castle, a landmark on a hill overlooking the city. It is a picturesque spot: couples come here on romantic strolls, and parents bring their kids for an outing.

I see some young boys that I know. I overhear their conversation – they are talking about the same thing as everyone else. “I would never go to the cliffs to fight, whatever happened. I would rather die in the Mediterranean Sea and be fish food,” says one of them, whose name is Kiros.

No one wants to fight. We want to live without fear. May God bring peace to Mekelle and bless our elders. May He hear the voices of our youths. Peace for all the peoples of the world. ■

**The author is writing under a pseudonym*

'I would be happy to die on that stage'

Beloved Ethiopian singer Mahmoud Ahmed gave his final concert in Addis Ababa earlier this year. He spoke to **Maya Misikir** just days before.

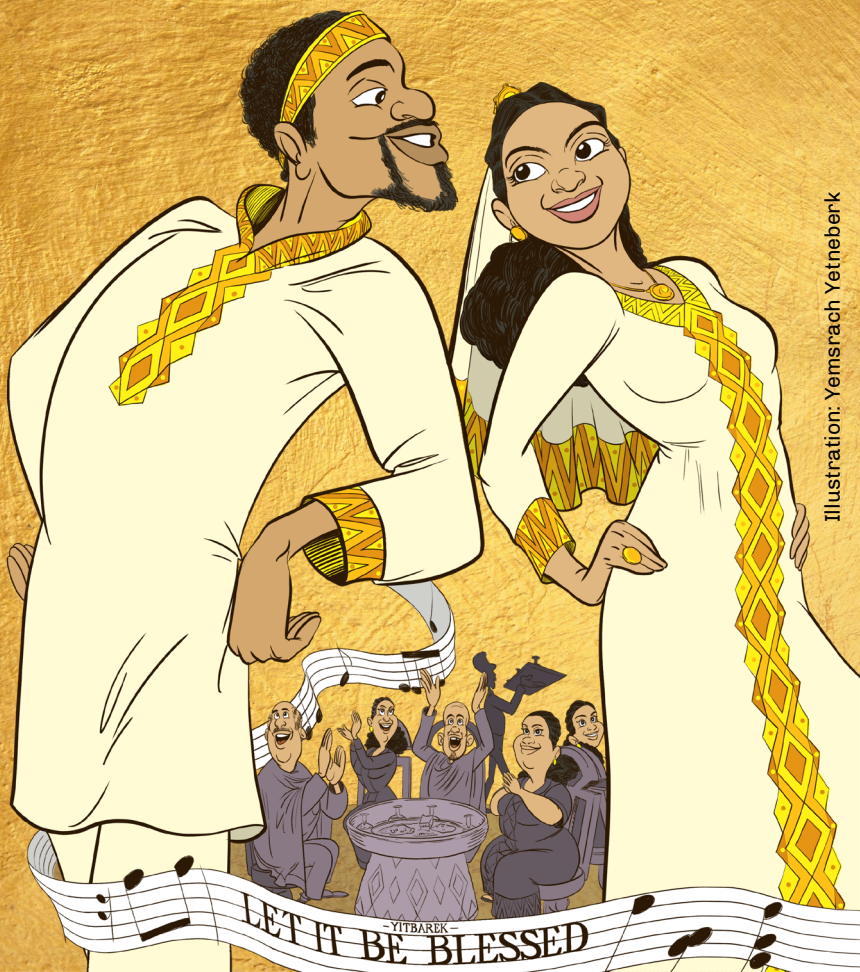


Illustration: Yemsrach Yetneberk

Editor's note: *This interview is best read with a soundtrack. To start with, line up the song Tizita wherever you get your tunes:*

[YouTube](#), [Spotify](#) or [Apple Music](#)

People started arriving at Addis Ababa's Millennium Hall from 4pm. By the time Mahmoud Ahmed stepped onto the stage, it was 1.35am and the place was packed. Despite the long wait, the crowd welcomed him with deafening cheers as he carefully made his way to the microphone, supported by an assistant and a cane. As usual, he was clad in his signature all-white woven traditional outfit.

Mahmoud bowed several times, acknowledging the adoration. Then he began to sing. As his familiar voice rang out, live in concert for the very last time, tears flowed down the faces in the audience. It is not for nothing that he is venerated as the king of nostalgia.

But this time, the nostalgia was for him.

Mahmoud Ahmed is a national icon, a living legend whose music has provided a soundtrack to almost every era of modern Ethiopian history. He rose to prominence in the time of Emperor Haile Selassie; kept playing through the night-time curfews imposed by the communist Derg regime; and then, as Ethiopia opened up, his songs wove themselves into the fabric of modern Ethiopian life.

He hasn't made new music for several decades, but teenagers today can still belt out the words to his most famous songs. No wedding is complete without playing *Yitbarek* – "let it be blessed" in Amharic – at top volume (as per the illustration above). Academics study the poetry of his lyrics.

When people want to make a statement, they often reach for his music, like the anti-war protesters who blasted



Photo: Jack Vartoogian/
Getty Images

Selam (peace) through the streets of Addis Ababa as they marched in 2022. Or like former president Sahle-Work Zewde, who cryptically tweeted a line from the Mahmoud Ahmed song ዝምታ ነው መልሱ (*Silence is my answer*) before tendering her resignation last year.

But perhaps his most celebrated song of all is *Tizita*, a song about nostalgia. One popular version of it is a mournful lament for a lost love:

ትናንትናን ጥሶ ዛሬን ተንተርሶ

It has passed on from yesterday, and it's leaning on today

ነገንም ተውሶ አምናንም አፍርሶ

It borrows from tomorrow, it has run over from the year before

ፆመጣል ትዝታሽ ጓዙን አግበሱብሶ

Your nostalgia comes with all its baggage

ፆመጣል ትዝታሽ ጓዙን አግበሱብሶ

Your nostalgia comes with all its baggage

These themes of lost love, heartbreak and longing run like a golden thread through much of his work. Perhaps, in a country that has known more than its fair share of heartbreak, this explains part of his popularity.

Mahmoud still loves *Tizita* as much as everyone else. “I get goosebumps when I hear others perform the song,” he told *The Continent*, in an interview just days before his final concert. “I could sing it all day and night.”

Shoe-shine boy

Mahmoud was born in 1941, to parents who came from rural Gurage, in the Central Ethiopia Region. He spent his



young years listening to beloved singers like Bizunesh Bekele and Tilahun Gessesse – later, they would be friends, and sing alongside each other. But this future was difficult to imagine as he cycled through various odd jobs: busboy, handyman, shoe-shiner.

Mahmoud got his big break in the 1960s. He was a teenager, working in a club in Addis Ababa, when he volunteered to replace an absent singer of the Imperial Bodyguard Band. He remembers his supervisor offering him something to boost his courage, but he didn't need it.

“Even with nerves, after the first song, I couldn't even tell you what was in front of me anymore,” he said. “I got lost in the music.”

At that time, Ethiopian music was

dominated by traditional performers known as azmaris. These were poets who commented on social and political life, accompanied by traditional instruments like masinqos, a single string fiddle. Mahmoud – who went on to make the Imperial Bodyguard Band his own – pushed the envelope to make night club music, helping usher in what is known today as the golden age of Ethiopian music in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1980s, he began touring Ethiopian diaspora communities in the United States and Europe, which brought his music to a wider audience. A 1986 collection, *Ere Mele Mela*, earned him a review in the *New York Times* (“a vital pop-music style from a little-known corner of the world”, it said).

Francis Falceto, the French music journalist behind the well-known Ethiopiques music series, said that it was *Ere Mele Mela* that first piqued his interest in Ethiopian music. Mahmoud’s tracks are extensively featured in the Ethiopiques volumes alongside fellow legends like Mulatu Astatke, the percussionist regarded as the father of the Ethio-jazz genre.

The last note

Ethiopia’s love for Mahmoud is not without its complications. Ethiopian nationalists have, at times, instrumentalised his music for their own ends. During the border war with Eritrea from 1998-2000, Mahmoud performed in front of soldiers to boost their morale. He sang *Selam*, a call for peace; but he also sang his patriotic single *Enat Ethiopia Yedefereh Yiwdem* (Mother Ethiopia, may your violators perish).

The song’s lyric threatens invaders and extols the virtues of dying for one’s country. The song made a comeback during the recent Tigray war, as a jingle in pro-war broadcasts on state media.

For Mahmoud, the responsibility of performing not just for a crowd but for a nation can feel heavy. He says he has always prayed for guidance on how to keep Ethiopians happy. Now, though, the music must do the talking. “I don’t want to dictate how people see me or my work, I leave this to them. May God show them the love that they have shown me.”

In Addis Ababa, as the curtain fell on his final note, there was plenty of love in the air. And tizita.

“These are people I have served, and they have shown me love and helped me grow. To know that they are now here to show me their respect at this farewell, I would be happy to die on that stage.” ■



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MAHMOUD AHMED

The Museum of Stolen History

Things can be taken. Their stories must still be told.

Curated by Shola Lawal | Art direction by Wynona Mutisi





Kakuungu

If its puffed cheeks, exaggerated chin, and pouted lips provoke instant fear in the observer, then the *Kakuungu* mask is doing exactly what it is meant to do.

The rare artefact, made of wood, raffia, and tortoise shell, was one of hundreds of items bought by ethnographer Albert Maesen for only a few dollars on behalf of Belgium's Royal Museum of Central Africa. The mask is 1.5m tall and weighs about 10kg. There are about nine other

such masks – and none remains in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This reflects just how intensely that country's heritage has been looted and hoarded.

Kakuungu, originally a dance mask from the Suku people in the southwestern Kwango region, was worn during rituals to initiate boys into manhood. Its fierce appearance was meant to instil fear, obedience and respect, and ward off threats to initiates. After the rituals, the

boys would take new names to mark their adulthood. The Suku believe the mask can cure sterility, calm the weather, and intervene in times of crisis.

Formerly known as the Congo Free State, the DRC suffered through one of the most brutal colonial regimes. Belgian officers coerced local chiefs to sign away their territories in return for alcohol or a piece of cloth. These territories were then claimed in 1885 by Belgium's King Leopold as his personal fiefdom.

Leopold's enforcers made locals work on rubber plantations for long hours to fuel Europe's car and bicycle industry. Punishment for failing to meet quotas or for resisting was severe: severed limbs, or worse, death. Leopold never visited, but the limbs were often set out for his commissioners' viewing pleasure on trips to the domain. Some 10-million people died. Congo became one of the most lucrative occupation projects.

By the late 1880s, word of the atrocities began to filter out, thanks to missionaries visiting the colony. Journalists and activists from fellow colonial European nations began protesting Leopold's brutality in newspapers. They denounced "red rubber", stained with the blood of the Congolese. The king denied any knowledge of the violations. Eventually, the outcry was so great Leopold was forced to hand the region over to the Belgian government in 1908, officially making it a colony.

But conditions remained dire. The

Belgian Congo was highly segregated, with locals and Europeans living separately. A deliberate policy of under-education was enforced. Nearly no Congolese people reached university level, and they were never allowed to participate in politics.

Resistance grew, particularly in rural regions where people worked on plantations for little pay. In 1931, in the Kwango district where *Kakuungu* originated, workers revolted against the colonial authorities and refused to pay taxes. The Belgian army took about 500 lives in the crackdown that followed.

When a wave of independence movements swept across Africa in the late 1950s, Belgium too was forced to hand over the country to the Congolese. But there were fewer than 20 university graduates in the country. There was not a single doctor, lawyer, or Congolese army member. It was going to be a fragile independence. The impacts of this fragility are still evident in the country's instability today, the Catholic University of the DRC's Albert Malukisa told *The Continent*.

Belgium is now reckoning with that colonial past. In 2022, *Kakuungu* was one of the first objects the country "loaned" back to the DRC indefinitely, as part of an ongoing decolonisation project of its museum collections. Belgium's King Philippe, on a visit to DRC in June 2022, personally handed the mask to President Félix Tshisekedi. It now sits in the National Museum in Kinshasa.

Illustration note, by Congolese artist Edizon Musavuli: *The Kakuungu mask embodied the law and power of the ancestors. Its massive size and grotesque features inspired both fear and respect. In this scene, it towers over the gathering, emphasizing its role as a spiritual judge. The elders observe and the young initiates watch, fully aware of the moment's significance.*

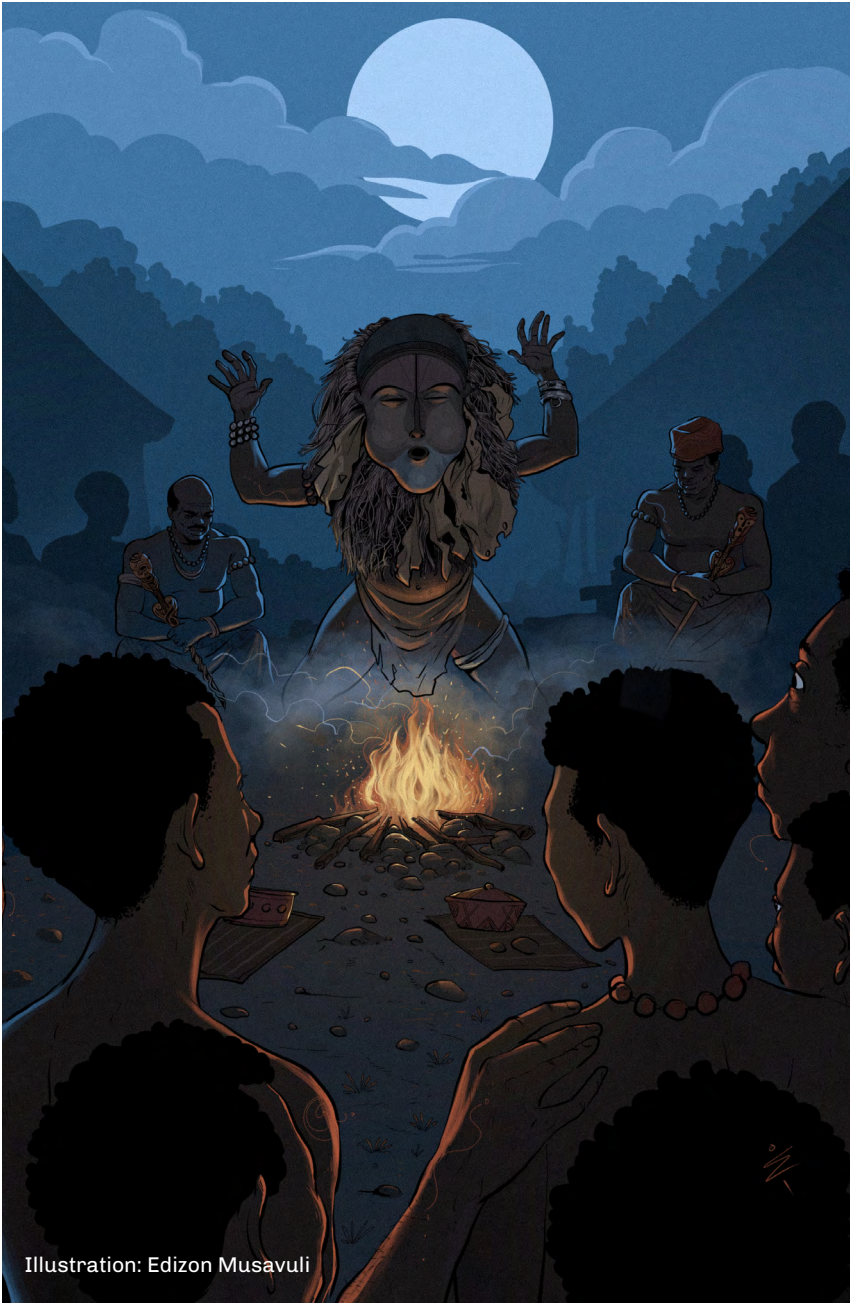
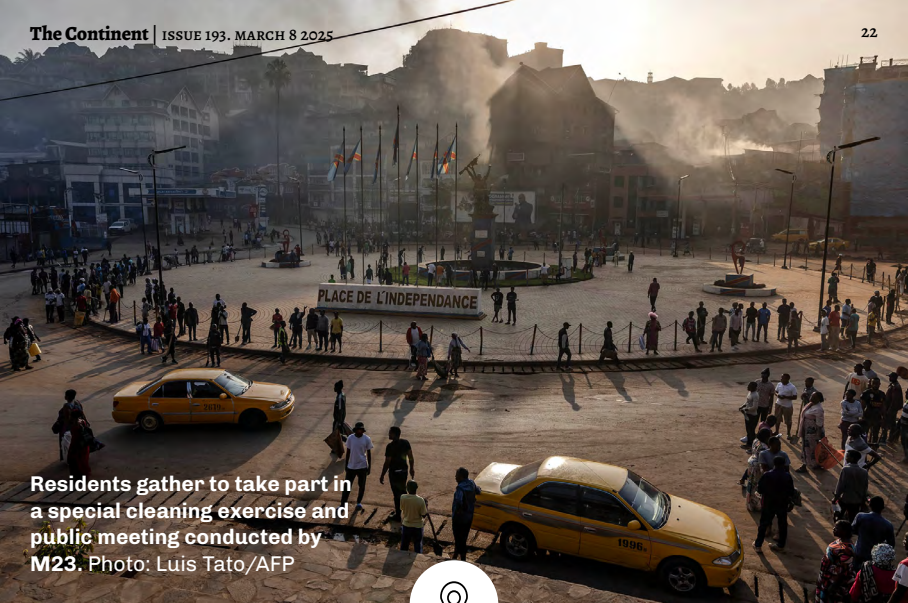


Illustration: Edizon Musavuli



Residents gather to take part in a special cleaning exercise and public meeting conducted by M23. Photo: Luis Tato/AFP



BUKAVU

Occupation tests Bukavu's century-long resilience

Wrapped along Lake Kivu's shores, the city's streets and buildings tell the story of the decades of struggle over who runs this part of the DRC.

Prosper Heri Ngorora

Bukavu's clay-loam soils hug its lakeside cliffs and hills to create a city that is almost bewilderingly beautiful. A peninsula, the city juts into Lake Kivu in five sections that from a distance look like a green palm floating on the water.

From the lake, whether you arrive by boat, fast canoe or pirogue, the closer you get, the more the city's Western-style art deco buildings come into focus.

Near the shores, colonial-era villas stretch out to touch the lake. The Hôtel Résidence boasts a century-old elevator. A night there costs as much as \$175. It sits on another reminder of the country's changing history – the Avenue PE Lumumba.

At the heart of old Bukavu, the Place de l'Indépendance public square has statues to DRC figures like Patrice Lumumba and Laurent-Désiré Kabila.

Built as the colonial administrative

centre of the Kivu region, Bukavu used to be called Costermansville, after a Belgian vice-governor who is said to have killed himself after details of the genocide committed by Belgium came out. Its importance waned with the growth of Goma on the other end of Lake Kivu. It is now home to more than a million people.

Most of those people live further from the shore, in the low cost houses that cling to the city's hills. Jean-Luc Chiza Chito, a human rights activist, says these are people who “make their living from manual labour, such as masonry, plumbing and carpentry”.

Chito has lived in Bukavu for more than 20 years. Policy heads like him gravitate towards the city more than to its better known “twin city” Goma, whose *raison d'être* is trade. To this day, it remains a city where almost everyone likes to discuss politics, says Byamungu Samuel, who co-ordinates citizen movements and pressure groups in South Kivu.

A new kind of politics is in town when *The Continent* visits in late February. Two weeks prior, Bukavu was occupied by the Rwanda-backed M23 rebels. There is evidence of recent looting across the town: broken shop doors and empty shelves. And the new administration's decision to suspend all the employment of all civil servants has chilled the streets further.

In a press release, M23 said the suspensions were temporary: “It's all part of the post-war assessments and with a view to optimising the reorganisation of the state's public services.”

Mika Kasi, who worked at the Bukavu town hall, certainly hopes so. “Living in

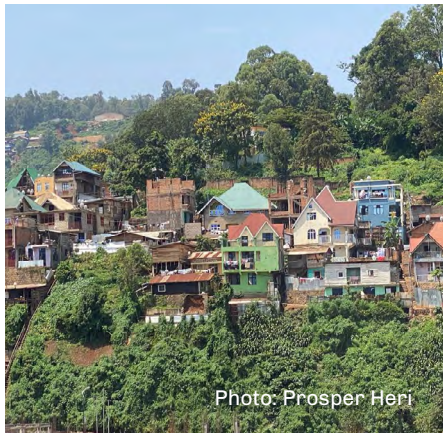


Photo: Prosper Heri

this time of war is complicated. It will be difficult for me to take care of my family,” he complains. Careful not to sound too critical, he adds: “But it's just a matter of time before we're back at work.”

Like in Goma, the wider Bukavu economy is strapped for cash since the M23 occupation isolated the city from the rest of the DRC. Many banks are still closed and big employers like the Kiliba sugar factory, Bralima breweries and Pharmakina have suspended activities.

Instead, Bukavu residents are being put to unpaid work. “The new authorities have introduced community sanitation work, which is making the city cleaner and cleaner,” says Patient Bisimwa, who used to repair electronic equipment before looters stole customers' property from his shop.

There will be dire consequences if the cash economy doesn't recover soon, says human rights activist Chito. “People are living in abject conditions. Many live by manual labour. When they don't work, hunger threatens to exterminate them.” ■

Women in power, empowering women: a virtuous cycle

Happy International Women's Day? If women's participation in politics and policymaking is essential to democracy and sustainable development, Africa is falling short. Half of the continent's adults, but only 27% of parliamentarians, are women.

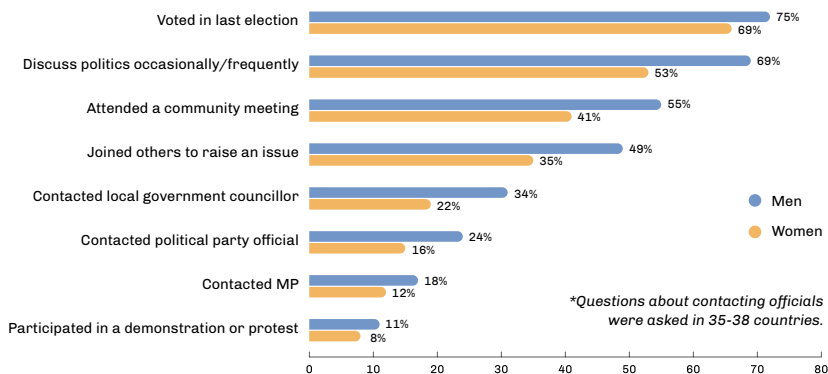
Even outside the corridors of power, women are less likely than men to engage in political and civic activities. In Afrobarometer surveys in 39 African countries, fewer women than men say they voted in their most recent national elections (69% vs 75%).

The gender gap is substantially wider

when it comes to discussing political matters with family or friends (-16 percentage points), attending community meetings (-14), and joining others to raise an issue (-14). Women were also less likely than men to contact their political representatives during the past year.

Maybe if more women got involved, more would get elected, though that simple "solution" seems to ignore persistent barriers to women's participation. Research has shown it also works the other way around: As women's representation in political institutions grows, gender gaps in citizen engagement shrink. ■

The gender gap in political participation | *39 African countries | 2021/2023



Source: Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200 to 2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.



Film Review

Wilfred Okiche

Yeelen, the light that endures

The pioneering work of Souleymane Cissé will live on for many generations to come.

Souleymane Cissé, the legendary Malian director who died on 19 February, was – alongside the likes of Ousmane Sembène and Sarah Maldoror – part of the pioneering generation of African filmmakers. Dying at the age of 84, Cissé had embodied film history that stretched back into the colonial past.

Cissé was trained in Moscow before returning home to make his movies. His filmography consists of seminal entries like *Baara* (*Work*), *Finye* (*The Wind*) and *Waati*. But it was his masterpiece *Yeelen* (*Light*) that altered the very essence of African film-making and gave Cissé immortal status. Released in 1987 at the Cannes Film Festival – where it became the first film by a Black African to score a jury prize – *Yeelen* is a stunning stylistic achievement.

The film dazzlingly repurposes oral



Maestro: Director/writer Souleymane Cissé. Photo: Jemal Countess/Getty Images via AFP

folklore native to Cissé's Bambara culture, and its circular interpretation of time, to reconceive Africa's past and future selves.

This reset conventions in cinema.

It said that African films didn't need to be limited to traditional modes of social realism and filmmakers didn't need permission to imagine worlds or upend the colonial gaze because cinema is an indigenous artform.

The story of *Yeelen* is the story of Mali, allegorised in the 13th century mythical saga of Nianankoro (Issiaka Kane), a young wizard who journeys across land and dreamscapes to do spiritual battle with his corrupt father, in order to claim his destiny.

While celebrating West African cosmology, *Yeelen* also critiques the corruption of power while predicting the suffering that is to follow the transatlantic slave trade. But Cissé also advances

Film stills from *Yeelen*

a hopeful message of salvation and rebirth, powered by a light that is almost unbearable.

Yeelen is furiously inspired and immaculately detailed. It's a highwater mark not only in African cinema. Martin Scorsese is a big fan. So too is Mati Diop, whose Cannes debuting stunner *Atlantics* quietly references *Yeelen*.

The film's indelible imagery – a woman bathing in milk, a child retrieving an ostrich egg – endures by itself. But it is also in the work of auteurs like Phillip Lacôte (*Night of the Kings*), Baloji (*Omen*) and CJ Obasi (*Mami Wata*).

Such is the endurance and transcendence of the legacy of the film and its creator. ■

THE QUIZ

0-3

“I think I need to start reading more newspapers.”

4-7

“I can’t wait to explore more of this continent.”

8-10

“The river of life has way too many crocodiles, if you ask me.”



- 1_** Is Guinea a landlocked or coastal country?
- 2_** What is Egypt’s currency called?
- 3_** True or false: Lake Kivu is not one of the African Great Lakes.
- 4_** Which year did Kenneth Kaunda become president of Zambia?
- 5_** What is the largest city in Gabon?
- 6_** The Kafu, Luangwa and Shire rivers are tributaries of which river (pictured)?
- 7_** Malabo is which country’s capital city?
- 8_** How many colours are there on Mauritius’s flag?
- 9_** How many member states are there in the African Union?
- 10_** What are Somalia’s official languages?

HOW DID I DO? WhatsApp ‘ANSWERS’ to [+27 73 805 6068](tel:+27738056068) and we’ll send the answers to you!

THE BIG PICTURE

My way on the highway: A parade captain directs revellers performing on the first day of Carnival in Luanda, on 1 March. This year the carnival's theme celebrated 50 years of Angolan independence.

Photo: Photo: Marco Longari/AFP



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