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The Continent

The black mermaid

Going underwater with Zandi Ndhlovu

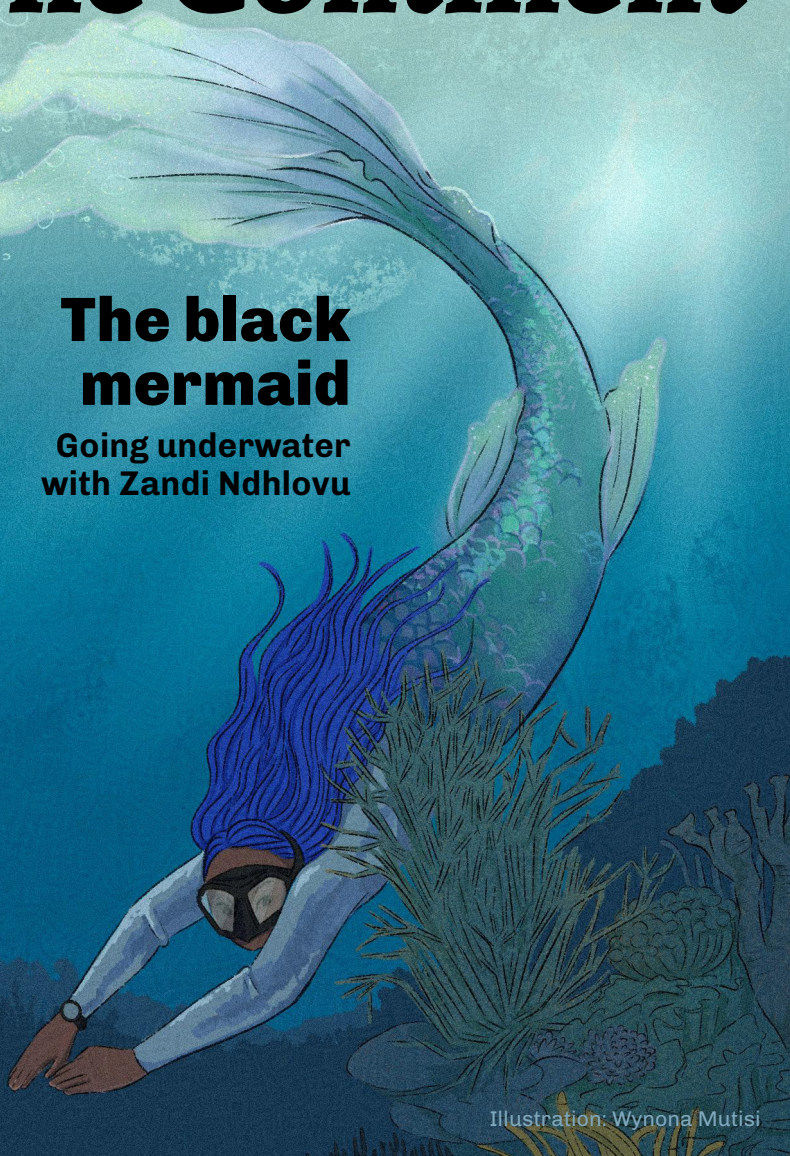


Illustration: Wynona Mutisi



Cover: In South Africa's apartheid era, the government's commitment to racism was sprawling and staggering. An actual government office to examine one's family history and proclaim their "accurate" racial classification, interior passports and a law on "separate amenities" were but a few items in the minutiae of discrimination. This week, we hang out with Zandile Ndhlovu, South Africa's first black woman freediving instructor, who is fighting to dent the legacy of apartheid's Separate Amenities Act. She is inviting black people to the beaches they were kept from, and into the meditative calm of ocean. (p14)

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A Guinea court has sentenced ex-military ruler Moussa Camara to 20 years in jail for crimes including the 2009 massacre of over 150 people at a rally in Conakry.

SOUTH AFRICA

Meth and backyard armies: big farms are a big worry

South African police say they detained 95 Libyan “students” found at an illegal military training camp at a farm in White River, Mpumalanga province. The Libyans were in the country on study visas but the site at which they were studying “is a military base by the looks of things,” said police spokesperson Donald Mdhluli. This came barely a week after police seized drugs worth an estimated \$109.5-million in street value, from an “industrial-scale” meth lab on a farm in Groblersdal, Limpopo province.

TANZANIA

Government forcibly evicting Masaai to boost tourism

Tanzania plans to relocate more than 82,000 people from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area under a programme which began in 2022, according to a new report by Human Rights Watch. The Masaai are accused of encroaching on wildlife habitats in the area which overlaps significantly with their ancestral lands. The government’s wildlife rangers have often made headlines for the violent evictions, leading the World Bank to suspend its funding for a \$150-million Tanzania tourism project in April.



Lethal force: Police killed over 200 student protesters. Photo: AFP

POLICE BRUTALITY

Cops kill protesters in Nigeria and Bangladesh

Police killed at least two of the thousands of Nigerians who took to the streets this week to demand solutions to the country's cost of living crisis. The two died in Niger State on the first day of what protests are promising will be 10 "Days of Rage" across the country. In Bangladesh, on Wednesday, police responded to demonstrations against protest-related killings, disappearances and mass arrests, by cracking down even further on protesters. Over three weeks of student demonstrations there, police have killed about 200 people and arrested 10,000.

BIG TECH

Meta threatens to pull WhatsApp out of Nigeria

In the latest row between regulators and Big Tech, *Tech Cabal* reports that Meta, the parent company of WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram, is considering "withdrawing certain services" from the Nigeria. This comes after the country's consumer protection commission fined WhatsApp \$220-million for violating data privacy, and ordered it to stop sharing user data with other Meta platforms, unless it has explicit consent.

FISH & SHIPS

Mozambique claws back millions from 'tuna bonds' baddies

Prinivest, a shipbuilding company founded by Lebanese billionaire Iskandar Safa, must pay Mozambique \$825-million for defrauding the state, a London court ruled this week. Prinivest was at the heart of a multibillion-dollar "tuna bonds" fraud scheme in which they connived with Credit Suisse and VTB bankers, and bribed former finance minister Manuel Chang for government guarantees, to get bad loans for unfeasible maritime projects. The loans collapsed Mozambique's economy. Chang, meanwhile, is facing criminal charges in New York.

SUDAN

SAF military leader survives drone-strike assassination attempt

General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, leader of the Sudanese Armed Forces, survived a drone strike which killed five people at an army base in eastern Sudan where he was attending a graduation ceremony. The Rapid Support Forces paramilitary group, which is at war with SAF, denied responsibility for the attack, attributing it to infighting within SAF. Both RSF and the SAF-aligned government have now agreed to join the latest effort to end the 15-month war: US-sponsored peace talks in Switzerland.



Unstruck: SAF general Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. Photo: AFP

LIBYA

Twelve jailed for sowing seeds of Derna dam disaster

Libya's attorney-general, Sadiq Al-Sour, said this week that 12 unidentified current and former officials were sentenced to prison over corruption and mismanagement that contributed to the collapse of two dams last September. Four others were acquitted. Overwhelmed by heavy rains from a cyclone, the dams burst and flooded the eastern port city of Derna, killing at least 4,500 people, displacing about 10 times more, and devastating homes and infrastructure.

PRESS FREEDOM

Journalism is under attack and dying everywhere

News from within Gaza continues to be incredibly dangerous to obtain: on Wednesday, an Israeli air attack killed two *Al Jazeera* reporters who were in a clearly marked press vehicle, bringing journalists deaths in the Israel-Hamas war to 113, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Journalism in Africa continues to fade away: on the same day, in Kenya, the Standard Media Group announced that it would lay-off at least 300 workers. In most countries, quality journalism has collapsed.



Tehran strike: Hamas's political leader Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated by Israel. Photo: AFP

MIDDLE EAST

Israel, Hezbollah kill hope for a ceasefire

Israeli forces assassinated Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran this week, sounding the death knell on a ceasefire deal in Gaza. Hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah, an Iran-backed militant group in Lebanon, had escalated days earlier after 12 people were killed in a strike on a play area in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Israel blamed Hezbollah – which denied responsibility – and killed the group's senior commander Faud Shukr days later in an attack in the Lebanese capital Beirut. Israeli attacks in its neighbours' capitals could provoke retaliation that could escalate into a regional war.

INDIA

Hundreds dead and missing in Kerala landslide disaster

At least 196 people have been confirmed dead and nearly 200 remain missing in the Wayanad district of India's Kerala state, after the area was hit by multiple landslides on Tuesday. Torrential rains caused a river to burst its banks, flooding villages and plantations. The state is prone to heavy rains, flooding and landslides. Nearly 500 people were killed in Kerala in 2018 in one of the worst incidents of floods in the area.

VENEZUELA

Protesters demand electoral audit

A quarter of Venezuela's population has already left the country. That's over seven-million people. The economy has shrunk to half of what it was in 2014 on the back of mismanagement and biting Western sanctions. And the man presiding over this, Nicolás Maduro, has declared himself winner of last Sunday's election, ushering in a third term. His opponent, Edmundo González, who was leading in polls, immediately disputed the result and protests broke out. Maduro sells himself as a socialist politician at odds with the capitalist West – although he reportedly has \$2-million in personal wealth.

Olympics

Africa in Paris

Need a quick roundup of how the continent is faring in the Olympics? We've got you covered.

Michelle Katami in Paris

The world's grandest and most prestigious sporting event – the Summer Olympic Games – is under way in blistering hot Paris. Three African countries have medalled so far, with South Africa topping the table.

The continent's first medal came from rugby sevens, where South Africa's men won the bronze. The competition kicked off two days prior to the colourful, long and very wet opening ceremony along the Seine.

In fencing, Fares Ferjani from Tunisia took silver after falling to South Korea's Oh Sanguk 15-11. Notably, Egyptian Nada Hafez competed while seven months pregnant and made it into the final 16.

To secure the continent's first gold medal, South Africa's Tatjana Smith dived into the Paris La Défense Arena waters in women's 100m breaststroke and clocked 1:05.28. It was an incredible comeback for the swimmer who already held the title but had been in fourth position at the 50m

turn. She also won a silver in the women's 200m breaststroke – which we now know to have been the final competition of her career: just after the event, the South African swimming star announced her retirement from professional sports.

The other medals secured were the bronze won by South African Alan Hatherly in men's cross-country mountain biking and Egypt's Mohamed Elsayed in men's épée.

South Sudan's Olympic hoops hopes got off on the wrong foot when the basketball event organisers played the Sudan anthem instead of their own, but the Bright Stars outshone Puerto Rico in their opening match and went down fighting against the United States in their second. Nigeria's women, D'Tigress, won against Australia but lost to France.

Boxing hopes were dashed when African Games champion Cynthia Ogunsemilore tested positive for the banned substance furosemide. Congolese boxer Marcelat Sakobi raised awareness about the ongoing conflict in the DRC when she placed her hand in front of her mouth and pointed two fingers at her head, despite the Olympics' rule against making political statements.

And, not ones to let a grand sporting event go without scandal, Nigerian officials failed to register sprinter Favour Ofili for the 100m race. ■

Ethiopia

Birr: Abiy, it's cold outside (don't leave us a loan)

Ethiopia relaxed its rules to win investment and a big IMF loan. Currency freefall was the quiet part.

Kiri Rupiah

In a major policy shift overturning 50 years of practice, the Ethiopian government allowed the birr to trade freely and not at a rate fixed by the central bank. By the end of Monday, the first day of the floatation, the birr was 30% weaker against the United States dollar compared with the week before.

The policy change was a requirement for securing a \$10.7-billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. On Tuesday, the IMF announced that it will lend Ethiopia \$3.4-billion over the next four years, with \$1-billion disbursed immediately.

As Ethiopia attempts to dig itself out of a financial hole, the IMF, often called the “lender of last resort”, also wants it to negotiate with other lenders and

restructure its \$28-billion national debt. The depth of Ethiopia's debt crisis became glaring in December when it defaulted by failing to pay \$33-million on a \$1-billion Eurobond.

In recent decades, promising African economies borrowed outside development banks, at substantially higher interest rates, for ambitious infrastructure projects projected to spur growth. But shocks, from the pandemic to wars and coups, have undercut the projected growth.

After a harrowing and expensive two-year civil war in the northern Tigray region, Ethiopia's economy has struggled, especially as new territorial conflicts cropped or escalated, and unpredictable weather caused long droughts and destructive flooding.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed appears to hope that the conditionalities and loops of lower interest lenders will be less painful. “There are some that say we are adding more debt to the country's already high debt. But borrowing from the IMF and the World Bank is like borrowing from one's mother,” he said at a conference in Addis Ababa in December.

But the bailout Abiy seeks from the IMF is nearly equal to the \$10-billion he intends to spend on the Chaka Project, a sprawling hill-top palace complex overlooking Addis Ababa, earlier reported on by *The Continent*. Abiy has said that money will come from private investors. ■

South Africa

Zuma-ANC divorce sealed with a hiss

After spending months campaigning for another party, former president Jacob Zuma has officially been expelled from the ruling(ish) party.

Marché Arends

The bond between Jacob Zuma and the African National Congress used to be so strong that it withstood all manner of serious allegations against the former president: corruption, tax evasion, racketeering and rape. Finally, however, that bond has broken.

This week, Zuma – who was president of South Africa from 2009 to 2018 – was formally expelled from the party by its disciplinary committee. The straw that broke the camel’s back was Zuma’s open campaigning for an entirely different party in the run-up to the general election in May.

In that election, support for the ANC fell dramatically, to just 40% – with Zuma’s new outfit, uMkhonto we Sizwe, largely

responsible for much of that decline. It received a staggering 14.58% of the popular vote, making it the third-largest party in the country.

In comments to *The Continent*, the ANC’s acting spokesperson Zuko Godlimpi said that Zuma had never previously been formally charged with contravening party rules. He declined to say which senior party leader had brought the charges this time around.

Zuma has 21 days to appeal the decision.

“The reality is the ANC has never demanded accountability for the sins of its members when it comes to corruption,” said anti-corruption investigator and former ANC MP Andrew Feinstein. “The only time something happens to them is if they threaten the ANC, which is what Zuma has done.”

“If he had just stayed silent, he probably would have been fine,” Feinstein said. ■



Splitsville: Jacob Zuma was a part of ANC history. Now he’s apart from ANC future. Photo: Michele Spatari/AFP

World

Repeated shocks are making more people hungry

Children are going hungry – and so are millions of their parents: the world is not on track to meet any of its nutrition-related targets by 2030.

Josephine Chinele

Across eastern and southern Africa, two million children are living on extremely poor diets, which could stunt their growth permanently. That's according to the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef).

Much of this food insecurity has been triggered by repeated natural disasters. The latest of these, El Niño, caused extremely low rainfall in Malawi, Lesotho, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

"There are natural disasters every year. I'm not surprised that our children are facing malnutrition. The southern African countries in question have not had time

to recover from previous shocks," said Joseph Gausi, the coordinator of the Civil Society Organisations Nutrition Alliance, a Malawian coalition.

The impact of this harsh weather is made worse by high inflation rates and increased cost of living across the region, said Etleva Kadilli, the regional Unicef head.

And the malnutrition problem extends far beyond southern Africa.

The world has been set back 15 years on the global goal of ending hunger and malnutrition – according to last month's State of Food Security and Nutrition report by the World Health Organisation.

Levels of undernourishment in the world are comparable to those in 2008-2009, the WHO report shows. They fell for about a decade but have been rising since 2020, when the Covid pandemic started.

"I'm not surprised that our children are facing malnutrition. The southern African countries in question have not had time to recover."

Last year, as many as 757-million people may have faced hunger, including one in every five Africans. About half of the people facing hunger in Africa are in the eastern region. ■

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The Continent

The misadventures of Russian mercenaries in Mali

Stability in the Sahel appears more elusive than ever.

Beverly Ochieng

Dozens of Russian fighters affiliated with Africa Corps, formerly the Wagner Group, were killed in a battle in northern Mali late last week. This is their biggest military setback on the continent to date, and will draw attention to the Kremlin's diplomatic and security strategy in Africa.

It has also revealed Mali's near total dependency on Russian fighters – in consolidating a fragile hold on national territory, and in ending a chronic cycle of violence that continues to destabilise vast parts of the region.

Videos and images of dead foreign fighters were shared on social media after three days of intense fighting in the northern Mali town of Tinzaouatene, near the border with Algeria. Filming these scenes were the apparent victors – fighters affiliated with the Permanent Strategic Framework (CSP-DPA), a rebel coalition fighting for greater autonomy over the north. The coalition includes militants from al-Qaeda's Sahel branch, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

The CSP-DPA's political and military influence in Kidal and neighbouring regions has long undermined the

sovereignist posture of junta leader Colonel Assimi Goïta. Last August, Wagner mercenaries and the Malian Armed Forces launched a military campaign against the CSP-DPA, which upended a peace deal that the Tuareg separatists had signed with the civilian government in Bamako in 2015 for future co-existence and inclusivity.

In November, Malian forces and the mercenaries entered Kidal town after routing the CSP-DPA. Pro-junta groups cheered on as they waved the Malian flag and took photos alongside the Russian forces. The Wagner banner was briefly hoisted at the Kidal fort – symbolic of how the group was the backbone of Mali's operations, despite the junta's repeated denials that the private military firm was operating in the country.

Artisanal miners in the middle

The 2012 rebellion by armed groups that later formed the CSP-DPA and JNIM were among factors that precipitated the current instability in the Sahel. A current alliance between them remains unspoken as their ideologies contrast – the CSP-DPA seeks to be legitimate political authorities in the north, while JNIM promotes strict Islamist values. However,

their coordination is underpinned by similar goals: payback for alleged abuses carried out by the Russian fighters, including reports of arbitrary killings and detentions in the north.

Local rights groups have said that many of the victims have been artisanal gold miners as the mercenaries sought to control sites in the north, likely to replicate the resource-for-security model seen in its operations in the Central African Republic, Syria and Libya.

The overall defeat in Tinzaouatene will test what has been touted as a win-win cooperation between Russia and Mali's junta, which has brokered similar deals between the Kremlin and neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger as they formed the confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States.

Militancy has continued to spread, military rule has become prevalent and geopolitical wars have intensified.

Nearly three years after the mercenaries first arrived in Mali, the militancy has continued to spread, military rule has become prevalent and geopolitical wars have intensified as the West drastically loses its foothold in West Africa to the Kremlin.

Telegram channels affiliated with the mercenaries acknowledged battleground losses – some saying as many as 80 mercenaries, including key Russian war propagandists, had been killed – but expressed defiance and solidarity, raising

the likelihood of reprisal attacks in the coming weeks. It is rumoured that the Kremlin may dispatch reinforcements to the Sahel to sustain its influence.

Unusually, Ukrainian officials claimed to have provided the CSP-DPA with intelligence ahead of the raid. This appeared to reinforce claims in Russian state media that Ukrainians are active in the Sahel, especially after a doctored image of the armed group holding the Ukrainian flag alongside a flag of Azawad – northern Mali's short-lived independent state – was widely shared.

Mali's military rulers also – unusually – acknowledged the weekend's defeat, but warned against negative portrayals of the armed forces. It carried out retaliatory airstrikes using Turkish drones with the support of the Burkinabe army, under the banner of the Sahel alliance, where the majority of casualties were gold miners.

The Malian junta is unlikely to back down on attempting to ensure the north is consolidated by the army. It will rely heavily on the alliance, which is already stretched thin by the tide of violence in Burkina Faso and Niger. Russian reinforcements and continued access to weapons from emerging military powers like Turkey and Iran will feed operations.

The CSP-DPA is likely to continue resisting, having been buoyed by the Tinaouzatén victory. Stability will remain precarious. ■



Deep thoughts:
Zandile Ndhlovu finds
freedom beneath
the waves. Photo:
Zandile Ndhlovu

From Soweto to the sea

Apartheid tried to stop black people from enjoying beaches and the ocean. This is changing as people create new stories about life under the waves.

Doug Mattushek in Cape Town

Freediving means holding your breath and slipping below the waves – equipped with just a mask, snorkel, and weight belt. The cold water tingles your lips as you submerge. Beneath the surface, the chaos of life fades, replaced by the singular focus on your breath.

A vibrant world awaits below: corals, nudibranchs, urchins, starfish, and sponges thrive haphazardly on rocks.

At depth, kelp stems rise, their fronds creating a canopy that sways with the swell. The underwater crackling and diaphragm contractions remind you that this is not your natural habitat.

This is the deep blue world of Zandile Ndhlovu, South Africa's first black freediving instructor.

“Freediving lets me silence the world and become present,” Ndhlovu tells *The Continent*. “It has taught me how to be still and use my breath in how I show up

in the world.”

Ndhlovu grew up in Soweto, some 600km from the sea. “When you grow up in Soweto, you don’t have an idea of what the ocean is,” she says. “The only thing that you have are the stories about bodies of water.”

Many of those stories instilled not the promise of meditative calm, but fear: “We were told to stay away from the water,” she says. “It was no place for us to be.”

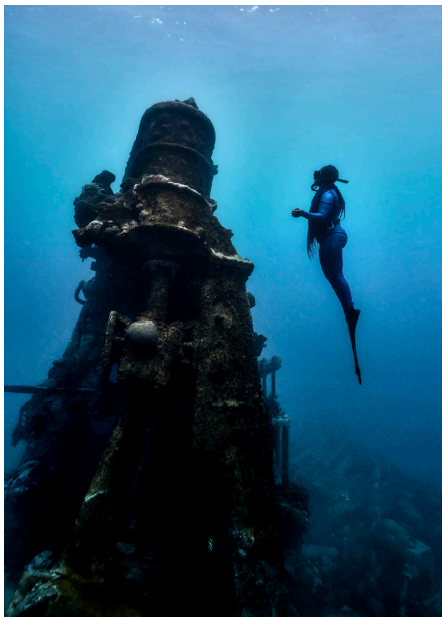
Near her grandmother’s home, a strong river brought regular reports of people drowning. This only added to the mythologising. “There would be a story of how a snake took the child. It was this big fearful place.”

This stayed with her until she went to the coast. “The first time I got to see the ocean, it was beautiful and powerful and scary – but it was also inviting.”

Later, on a snorkelling trip to Bali, she decided to become a professional. First she took up scuba diving, then freediving, eventually becoming a qualified instructor – allowing her to help others go underwater. Dubbed “the Black Mermaid”, Ndhlovu emerged as a leader.

“We were told to stay away from the water. It was no place for us to be. There would be a story of how a snake took the child. It was this big fearful place.”

In 2020, she founded the Black Mermaid Foundation in Langa, a township near Cape Town. Despite having access to long beaches, Langa has been



Wreck-reaction: Zandile Ndhlovu at the Pelinaion shipwreck in Bermuda.

Photo: James Doughty

on the wrong side of racist planning laws introduced by the apartheid regime – the impact of which persists today.

Under the apartheid government’s Separate Amenities Act, beaches were part of the public spaces that were segregated until as recently as 1990. Police vigorously enforced “Whites Only” notices, and so the best beaches – whether the most easily accessible or picturesque – were spaces non-white people could not enter.

Ndhlovu says that the goal of her foundation is to enable access to the ocean and overcome the “oppressive systems that prevented black people from enjoying the best beaches”.

Go, lady diver! Zandile Ndhlovu (left) with a student in Cape Town.
Photo: Craig Kolesky



And that in turn means people are more connected to the ocean: “You can’t protect something that you don’t know. You can’t protect something that you’ve never experienced. You can’t protect something you don’t believe belongs to you too. It’s creating that connection and ownership that allows children to know that these waters are theirs, too.”

Since its inception, the foundation has introduced more than 400 children to the shallows, affording them a window into the once inaccessible underwater world.

Ndhlovu’s achievements extend beyond diving. She also authored a children’s book that has been published in five languages. She was also named among the BBC’s 100 most influential and inspiring women in 2023, alongside

Michelle Obama, Nobel prize-winning economist Claudia Goldin, and renowned human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, among others.

Ndhlovu’s book, *Zandi’s Song*, is “about the ocean’s beauty, but it also covers conservation, culture, and black community history,” she explains. Illustrated by Katlego Keokgale, it is partly autobiographical and serves as an educational tool. “It includes a strong message about plastic pollution and aims to empower children to be the change in their community,” she says.

This may be the Black Mermaid’s most powerful legacy: a reminder, in a historically divided country, that the ocean belongs to all – and protecting it is a collective responsibility. ■



CULTURE

Symphony of dreams

*The newly formed Africa United Youth Orchestra is performing at the famous Carnegie Hall this weekend, as part of World Orchestra Week. Led by American conductor William Eddins, the orchestra includes young musicians from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria and South Africa. The Continent's photo editor **Paul Botes** documented their final rehearsal at the University of South Africa's ZK Matthews Hall as they prepared for their international debut in New York, where they are performing works by Michael Mosoeu Moerane, Mzilikazi Khumalo, Bongani Ndodana-Breen, and Antonín Dvorak.*



Violist Blandina Imelda
Dimande from Mozambique



Oboist Joseph
Makanda from Kenya



Violinist Oluwatosin Sunday
Dansu from Nigeria



Soprano Khayakazi Madlala
from South Africa

Toumani Diabaté 1965-2024

The king of the kora has played his last song.



Photo: Kenny Mathieson



Photo: Lars Opstad
Oslo World/
Rikskonsertene

Diakaria Traore in Bamako

Toumani Diabaté will be remembered around the world for his mastery of the kora, the 21-string musical instrument beloved across West Africa. Malians remember him in many more ways: the undisputed king of the kora, yes, but also a patron of the local arts, a campaigner for HIV awareness and a star in a legendary family of griots.

Diabaté was born on 10 August 1965 in Bamako, to musical parents. His mother, Nama Koïta, was a singer, and his father, Sidiki Diabaté, was crowned king of the kora at Festac '77, the now-legendary month-long festival of black arts and culture held in Lagos in 1977. The men come from a long line of griots

– custodians of the Mandingo storytelling traditions – who have played the kora for more than 70 generations.

Diabaté started playing the kora at age five, under his father's tutelage, and as a teenager was part of a musical group in Koulikoro on the banks of the River Niger. At 13, he took part in the Koulikoro Biennale, where his group won the prize for best traditional orchestra.

Until his death at 58, Diabaté graced many global, regional and national stages, performing with famous artists like Bassekou Sissoko, Youssou N'Dour and Ali Farka Toure. Yet he remained just as popular with his fans within Mali.

He was more than a musical genius.

As Senegalese singer N'Dour wrote, he was “an ambassador for Mali, an

ambassador for Africa”.

Diabaté worked hard at passing the mic and shining the spotlight on other musicians of similar heritage. His Symmetric Orchestra was mostly composed of other West African griots.

He founded the annual Festival Acoustik Bamako, hosting its first edition in 2016, which happened in the tense atmosphere that followed the 2015 terrorist attack on the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako. Diabaté saw Mali as “the heart of culture” in Africa, and was determined to engineer a cultural renaissance even as the country battles ongoing insecurity.

The king of the kora gave us a lot – at least 19 records – and the world gave him many of his flowers while he still lived. The School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London awarded him an

honorary doctorate for taking the kora to the world, and he was nominated for five Grammys – winning two.

He graced global festival stages including Glastonbury and Womad in the United Kingdom, Roskilde in Denmark, Sziget in Hungary and Womadelaide in Australia.

Still, it is sad that he is not here to see us enjoy the last music he made: *Toumani, Family and Friends*, a musical project with a number of artists from West Africa, including Tiken Jah Fakoly, Alpha Blondi and his son Sidiki. The album was set to be launched this month.

Through 32-year-old Sidiki, his uncle Mamadou Sidiki Diabaté and his second aunt, the Gambian musician Sona Jobarteh, West African griot culture lives on through the kora. ■

World class:
Toumani Diabaté
and French singer
Matthieu Chedid
in Cognac, 2017.

Photo: Yohan
Bonnet/AFP



PHOTO ESSAY

The more things change...

Mohamed Ould Ghazouani was inaugurated as president of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania for the second time on Thursday, after winning the country's election, on 29 June. Ghazouani won with 56.12% of the vote. The post-election period has been turbulent, with opposition supporters staging protests against what the opposition leader described as a "massive fraud" in the counting of

the votes. In response, the government has imposed repeated communications and internet shutdowns on the country. Even amid political tensions, however, normal life continues in this large, sparsely-populated nation in the north-west of the continent – and this is what it looks like, through the lens of AFP photographers **Marco Longari, John Wessels** and **Michele Cattani**.



A trader surveys the camel market on the outskirts of Nouakchott in Mauritania. Photo: John Wessels/AFP



Above: Passengers load their belongings aboard an iron ore train, a kilometre-long freight train running to and from the mines in Zouerat, the largest town in northern Mauritania.



Left: Customers stop for a bite at a street food joint in the Saharawi district of Nouakchott.



Below: Abdullah Habbot, 45, looks over manuscripts on a display at his library, founded by his family 200 years ago. Photos: Marco Longari/ AFP



Top: A woman walks through an urban farming area in Nouakchott, a few weeks ahead of the elections. Photo: John Wessels/AFP

Bottom: A man pulls down the dried -out branches of a date palm in the oasis of M'heiret, in the Adrar region of Mauritania. Photo: Michele Cattani/AFP



Top: An Imraguen fisherman looks to starboard off the coast of the Banc d'Arguin National Park, a natural reserve established in 1976.

Bottom: Karima Mint Sidi Mohamed reclines at her house in Iwik, a village of fisherfolk in the Banc d'Arguin. Photos: Michele Cattani/AFP

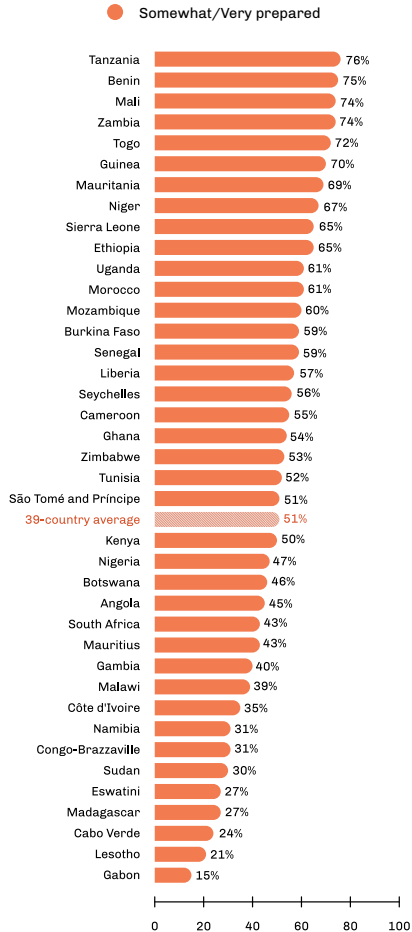
Pandemic management: Will governments be ready next time?

Continuing last week's look at lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic, Afrobarometer surveys in 39 countries shed further light on Africans' expectations from their governments during a public health crisis.

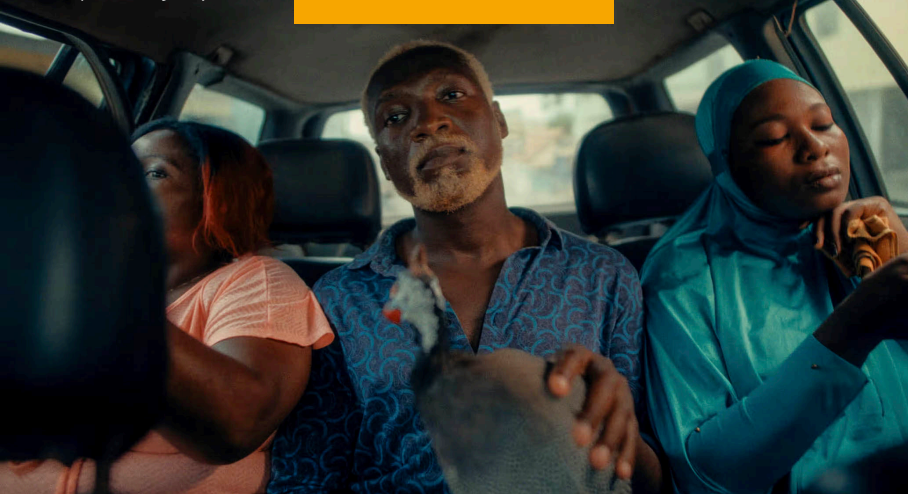
On average, 67% of respondents are willing to accept the state's use of the military or police to enforce public health mandates in a pandemic. But fewer than half think that such an emergency would justify postponing elections (49%) or censoring the media (42%). Only 50% say they trust their government "somewhat" or "a lot" to ensure that vaccines offered to them are safe.

Just 51% of Africans believe their government is "somewhat" or "very" prepared for a future public health emergency. This assessment varies widely, from 15% of respondents in Gabon, 21% in Lesotho, and 24% in Cabo Verde, to 75% in Benin and 76% in Tanzania. And 58% say their government should invest more in preparations for a future health emergency like Covid-19, even if it means fewer resources for other health services.

Government is somewhat/very prepared for future health emergencies | 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 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.



How to make a queer film in a homophobic country

Ghanaian director Joewackle J. Kusi speaks to **Wilfred Okiche** about his new short, *Nyame Mma*.

If there is anything that unites Ghanaians, says Joewackle J Kusi, it is the Black Stars – and homophobia.

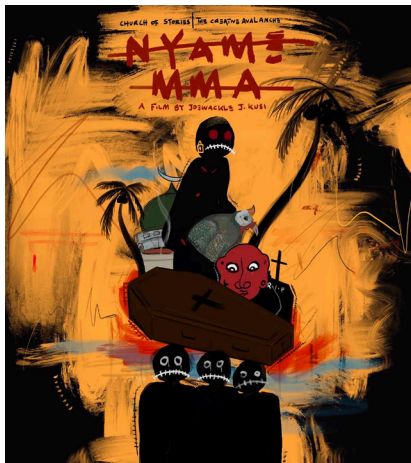
Speaking to *The Continent* via Zoom from Accra, the Ghanaian filmmaker recounts witnessing anti-LGBTQIA+ protests while shooting *Nyame Mma*, his tender and spiritual reflection on loss, grief, and the process of coming home. Though the protests were not specifically directed against his film, the timing was not lost on Kusi.

In the 28-minute short, 30-year-old Kwamena (Kobina Amissah-Sam) abruptly learns of his father's death. Long estranged from his family, Kwamena

travels from Sekondi – a city in Ghana's southwest – to his modest hometown up north where he will be forced to reconcile with the ghosts of his past.

In a plot development unlikely to be seen in more mainstream films coming out of Ghana, we soon discover Kwamena is an openly gay man. And while the conflicts that Kwamena confronts – disapproving parents, unrequited love – are tied to this, *Nyame Mma* (Fanti for “children of God”) is matter-of-fact about it, presenting it as just another dimension to Kwamena's complex life.

“Kwamena is a queer person who is not necessarily begging to be accepted,” says



Kusi. “He understands who he is and lives his life as truthfully as he can.”

The idea for *Nyame MMA* arose from a series of isolated situations the 32-year-old director observed, living in Ghana, where colonial-era laws prohibit gay sex and carry a prison sentence of up to three years for those found to have transgressed. Enforcement of this law led to the 2021 arrest of 21 people in southeastern Ghana after they attended a meeting for LGBTQIA+ advocates. They were eventually acquitted following an international outcry.

“The arrests didn’t sit well with me, and got me thinking about the concept of home,” he says. “Some of them would be unable to call home to bail them out.”

Legislators then began to float the idea of a bill criminalising LGBTQIA+ people and associations. “I felt that as an artist, if ever I was interested in telling a queer story, then this is the time.”

Along the line, Kusi’s elder brother

passed away, and he travelled six hours home for the funeral. Even though his protagonist takes a similar journey to pay final respects to a loved one, Kusi insists *Nyame MMA* is less autobiographical and more a constellation of lived experiences, of which his own are but a part.

In February, Ghana’s Parliament passed legislation cracking down even further on the rights of LGBTQIA+ people. The bill imposes a prison sentence of up to five years for “wilful promotion, sponsorship or support of LGBTQIA+ activities”.

President Nana Akufo-Addo has held off on signing the bill into law, pending the resolution of two legal challenges. Kusi is not encouraged by the delay. He observes: “Queer communities have always existed in Ghana, but the bill has now emboldened homophobes to go all out and be hostile, violent even, towards queer people.”

The anti-LGBTQIA+ protests witnessed by the cast and crew while shooting in Sekondi were something of a case in point.

Kusi concedes some trepidation over people who might choose to read the film as queer activism, which would be banned by the anti-LGBTQIA+ bill.

Kusi has managed a few intimate screenings in Ghana, but plans to screen *Nyame MMA* primarily at international film festivals while he works on his next project, a docufiction about the Ghana Must Go immigration debacle of the early 1980s. “I am being very careful – mostly because I cannot ensure the safety of my cast,” he says. “I have to be careful with the language around the publicity.” ■

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

"If the Olympics had a quiz event, I'd get a medal instead of whatever this is."



- 1_ What is the name of Ethiopia's currency?
- 2_ Which other country used the currency officially until 1997?
- 3_ A swimmer from which country won Africa's first 2024 Olympic gold medal?
- 4_ Name the Malian-French singer who performed at the Olympic opening ceremony.
- 5_ In which year did the DRC adopt its current national flag?
- 6_ Aside from Elizabeth II, who was the other head of state of Tanganyika?
- 7_ Ghadamès, or Gadamis, (pictured) is called "the pearl of the desert". Which country is it located in?
- 8_ Which country is known as "the pearl of Africa"?
- 9_ In which North African country is the El-Abid river found?
- 10_ In which region of Africa does the kora come from?

HOW DID I DO? WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we'll send the answers to you!

Lesotho's ugly knot of justice, politics and military power is increasingly untangleable

Tsoloane Mohlomi

Lesotho parliamentarian Tšepo Lipholo recently proposed the release from prison of the country's former army commander, General Tlali Kamoli. This has shone an uncomfortable spotlight on the relationship between civilian and military leaders.

General Kamoli stands accused of treason and being behind the killing of General Maaparankoe Mahao, an ally of Thomas Thabane, who was prime minister at the time. But the state has yet to secure a conviction against him, and he has already been in jail for seven years without bail – which is why Lipholo thinks that he should be released.

This dispute is a legacy of a destabilising period from 2014 to 2015, when rival parties – the Democratic Congress led by Pakalitha Mosisili and the All Basotho Convention Party led by Thabane – jostled for power. As they did so, senior political figures on both sides aligned themselves with sections of the military, further politicising the security forces. Ultimately, Thabane claimed that a coup had been initiated against his government and fled to South Africa, accusing Kamoli of seeking to overthrow him in order to

escape corruption investigations.

Kamoli was not immediately charged, however, because the snap elections held to resolve the crisis were won by Mosisili, who reappointed him. This caused dismay among the Basotho public and the SADC community, and so Kamoli was forced to resign in 2016. But it was only when Thabane regained power in 2017 that Kamoli was charged with a number of offences, including bombing a house belonging to Thabane's wife.

Coming at a time when the spectre of military rule is looming over the continent, the case of Kamoli is controversial and will be hard to resolve. On one hand, many Basotho will be nervous about the idea of allowing a controversial military leader to go free. On the other hand, the denial of Kamoli's basic right to a fair trial within a justice system that is seen to be used as a weapon by those in power against their opponents undermines Lesotho's democratic credentials. And so undoing ongoing instability becomes less likely. ■



Tsoloane Mohlomi is a freelance journalist in Lesotho. This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa

THE BIG PICTURE

Top of the heap: At the Namuwongo Reclaimed Shebang Fashion Show in Kampala, Uganda, models showcase designs recycled from trash as part of a communal reflection on wasteful culture.

Photo: Kabir Dhanji/AFP



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