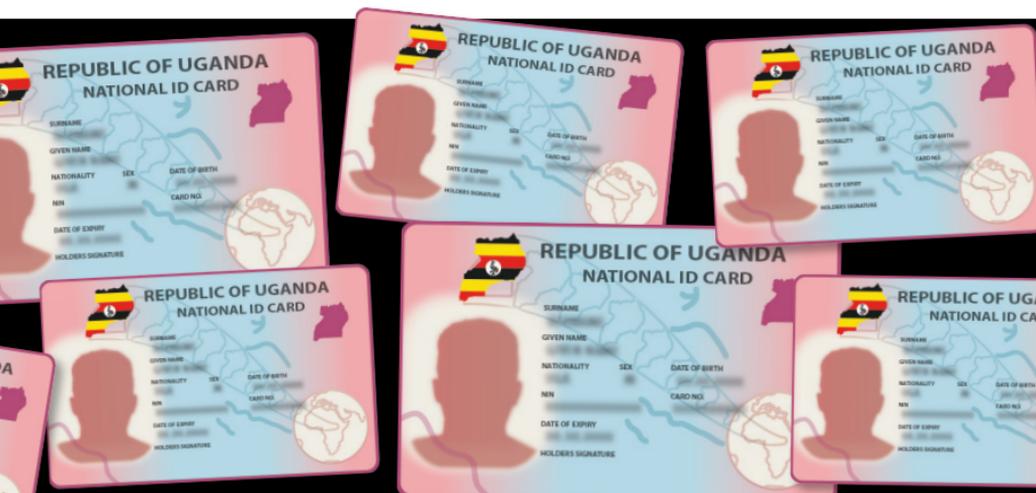


# The Continent

with Mail & Guardian



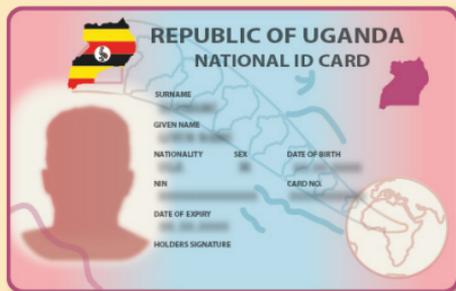
# VANISHED



Illustration:  
John McCann

## COVER: THE DISAPPEARED

In the past few months, hundreds of Ugandans – mostly connected to the opposition – have gone missing. Some have turned up in detention facilities; some were found with wounds consistent with torture; and some have not been seen again. *The Continent* reports from Kampala (p10).



(Illustration: John McCann)



## Inside:

- **'Mother of four':** The sexist coverage of Tanzania's new president (p7)
- **Vaccine nationalism:** Sure, the West won't share. But why are we still dependent on them? (p8)
- **Film:** Netflix's underwhelming impact on Nollywood (p19)
- **Ethiopia's new exiles:** Harrowing stories from Tigrayans forced to flee (p21)
- **The fairytale fighter:** the Cameroonian on the verge of world domination (p27)

**Pop culture: Ghana's iconic movie posters and hair salon signage.**  
Read more on p16.

**Correction:** Last week (Issue 42, page 6), due to an editing error, we referred to Jacob Mudenda as a leader in Zimbabwe's People's Democratic Party (PDP). Mudenda is in fact the speaker of the National Assembly of Zimbabwe. The party leader we meant to refer to was Benjamin Rukanda, the secretary-general of the PDP.

# The Week in Numbers

## 1-million

The tonnes of natural rubber produced by Côte d'Ivoire in 2020. This makes it the world's fourth-largest rubber producer. They were previously ranked seventh in the world. The country's rubber production has experienced a significant bounce over the years. In 2005, the West African country produced just 170,000 tonnes of rubber. It is now targeting two-million tonnes.

## \$9.6-billion

The estimated value of global trade that has been blocked by the ship that has become stuck in Egypt's Suez Canal. The enormous Ever Given container ship is firmly wedged in the waterway that links Europe and Asia, and it could be weeks before it is dislodged.



(Image: Nduka's Wedding Day by Jacon Osinachi)

## \$75,000

The value of digital artworks sold as Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) by Nigerian artist Jacon Osinachi this year. NFTs use blockchain technology to allow collectors to "own" digital property. The world record for the highest price tag on an NFT is held by an image by the American artist Beeple, which sold for \$69-million earlier this month.

## 14 days

The length of time that the Kenyan government has given the United Nations to come up with a plan to shut Dadaab and Kakuma, the country's two largest refugee camps. Dadaab is now considered the largest refugee camp in the world and has already been active for almost 30 years. Overcrowding issues over the years have led it to spill over beyond the camp's formal boundaries.

## 27%

The increase in the cost of flour in Mozambique. A 50kg sack that would have cost \$23 a year ago now costs about \$29. This means the price of bread will also increase, as of April 1, according to the Mozambican Association of Bakers.

# WE'LL SEE YOU AGAIN IN MAY

Wait, WHAT?! I need my weekly fix!



We'll miss you too! But we need to prep for your *next* run of weekly fixes. The team here at **The Continent** is tiny, and we've been going flat out since Jan, so we're taking April to replenish our journalistic powers and plan for the next run. We have some pretty cool plans! It'll be worth it.

In the meantime, we also want to say thank you for all the love and support you've shown us so far, from all over this beautiful continent and world. We'll be back in early May with plenty more journalism from correspondents all over Africa – and maybe a fresh look.

Until then, if you haven't yet subscribed, please do. It's easy, and it's free. And please do share the newspaper with friends, family and colleagues – not indiscriminately, but only to those who might value the work we're doing.

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# Republic of Congo

## 36 years – and counting

**P**resident Denis Sassou-Nguesso is going nowhere. The 77-year-old leader of the Republic of Congo was re-elected to another five-year term in last Sunday's election, which will extend his 36-year-rule over the Central African nation until at least 2026.

Sassou-Nguesso won just over 88% of the vote tally in an election boycotted by the main opposition party and which took place under an internet blackout. The latest victory further cements Sassou-Nguesso's grip on the nation of 5.4-million people where he first became president in 1979.

He lost the first multiparty elections in 1992 but returned to office in 1997 after a civil war. In 2015, a constitutional amendment eliminated the ban on presidential holders older than 70 and removed the two-term limits.

Both of these amendments benefited Sassou-Nguesso, who went on to win the following year's elections.

Opposition to the man nicknamed "emperor" for his style and longevity is thin. Two opponents in the 2016 vote were convicted of crimes in the aftermath of that election, ruling them out of Sunday's polls.



**On the campaign trail: President Denis Sassou-Nguesso in Owando**

His main rival in the recent election, Guy Brice Parfait Kolelas, died from Covid-19 just hours after polls closed, as he was being evacuated to France for treatment.

Congo-Brazzaville is one of Africa's major oil producers and Sassou-Nguesso is faced with a crumbling economy that has been struggling since the 2014 crash in oil prices, and his regime is faced with one of Africa's worst debt crises, which accounts for more than 100% of the nation's GDP. Yet, a recent investigation published by *The Continent* (Issue 38) found the government somehow found the cash to import more than 100 tonnes of weapon and ammunition into the country ahead of the election. ■

# Ghana

## Justice for 'Kwabena'

*Last year, The Continent reported on the pineapple farmer from Ghana who became the face of a Dutch advertising campaign – without his knowledge or any compensation. The Dutch company even got his name wrong. But now there is some good news!*

**Olivier van Beemen**

Leading Dutch supermarket chain Albert Heijn (AH) has reached a settlement with Okwesi Johnston, a Ghanaian pineapple farmer whose image was used in an advertising campaign without his consent. Both parties have agreed not to disclose the terms.

Johnston took Albert Heijn to court at the end of 2020 for the unlawful use of his portrait: he was featured on posters in fruit and vegetable departments in Dutch stores for several years without his knowledge or permission.

The posters said: “This is the Albert Heijn of Kwabena from Ghana ... Our growers, together with the AH Foundation, contribute to better living conditions for the local community.”

Johnston’s middle name is Kobena, a different way to spell Kwabena, but



nobody calls him that. When we tracked him down in Ghana, he said he was unaware that his image was being used to sell pineapples in Europe. We also investigated the “better living conditions” promised by Albert Heijn and its fruit supplier, the multinational company Blue Skies. In the Ghanaian villages where they claimed to have made a difference, we found overcrowded classrooms, toilet facilities that were no longer useable, and boreholes nobody used.

Albert Heijn did not answer specific questions posed by *The Continent*. “The issue has been resolved by mutual agreement,” it said.

Okwesi Johnston says, all things considered, he is satisfied with the outcome. ■

# What's kneeling got to do with it?

## Let's talk about the new Tanzanian president's policies, instead of just peddling regressive and lazy gender stereotypes



### Kiri Rupiah

What are the new Tanzanian president's plans for combating the spread of Covid-19? What are her policy positions? What does she plan on doing in her first 100 days? Anyone?

We don't know. What we do know, thanks to the *The Times* newspaper in the UK, is that President Samia Suhulu Hassan is a mother of four. We also know, thanks to a number of African publications, that she kneels and submits to her husband.

Sorry, *still* kneels and submits.

How this is important is beyond comprehension, but we certainly comprehend its function: the role of women in society remains defined in the sexist and often limiting discourses of domesticity, motherhood and passivity.

Never mind how historic her elevation to Tanzania's highest office might be, Samia Suhulu Hassan is still someone's wife and that information is apparently far more pertinent than where her leadership will take the country.

Despite the political successes of many individual women in the past century, women are still grossly underrepresented in the highest levels of African politics. In any profession, women must contend with the suspicion that they are damaging their family's wellbeing by succeeding in their career. Much more so in the corridors of power where focus and determination is preferred in men, but denounced in women.

The media has a crucial role in shaping the discourse around women politicians and we are failing terribly.

Instead of mirroring social, cultural and traditional patterns, the media should become an agent of change through its approach to reporting on women.

Perpetuating gender patterns is not just lazy, it is intellectually regressive. Women politicians are political protagonists in their own right.

Their husbands can confirm. ■

*Kiri Rupiah is The Continent's head of distribution.*

# Once again, Africa's rulers leave us at the self-serving 'mercy' of the western world

**Of course the West should share the vaccine. But why do we have to rely on their largesse in the first place?**

**Aanu Adeoye**

**M**uch has been written and said about the vaccine nationalism debate surrounding the various Covid-19 vaccines. By now the outlines of the story are all too familiar: Wealthy countries and alliances like Canada, the United States and the European Union are hoarding Covid-19 vaccines and refusing to support a motion at the World Trade Organisation, brought by South Africa and India, to waive intellectual property rights and allow poorer nations to manufacture generic versions of the vaccines.

Even the Covax alliance, the World Health Organisation's initiative to distribute vaccines to developing nations,

is not safe from the meddling of wealthy countries: either they have been slow to support it or, in Canada's case, have actively undermined it by signing up for 1.9-million doses, despite having already purchased enough vaccines for each of its citizens to be vaccinated six times over.

What's missing from this discussion is the culpability of African leaders in leaving us — yet again — dependent on the mercy of western nations.

In more than a year of reporting on this pandemic, I have been fortunate enough to speak to two of the leading figures in Africa's fight against the virus. Both of them, in carefully diplomatic language, have made it clear that the biggest challenge in Africa's response to the pandemic has been the preparedness — or lack thereof — of Africa's health systems.

Dr Chikwe Ihekweazu, the director-general of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), told me last April: "We haven't invested enough as a country in building enough molecular labs to help us with this [testing] across Nigeria."

Last month, Dr John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, while praising the efforts of African leaders to secure additional vaccines for the continent, pointedly observed: "We need a new public health order for our security ... we have to be very deliberate in our public health workforce development. We need 6,000 epidemiologists. We only have 1,900 on a continent of 1.2-billion people. That's



**Priorities: South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa got a vaccine shot last month. His government also cut health funding. In this economy.**

like going to a gunfight with a knife. We need 25,000 front-line responders; we only have about 5,000. That's not acceptable."

Both men are public health experts with decades of experience behind them. It's not hard to see why they have been underwhelmed by Africa's readiness when it comes to public health threats.

In 2001, members of the African Union agreed to spend 15% of their national budgets on health. By 2018, only two countries had met this lofty goal. Nigeria's biggest increase in five years in 2020 saw it rise only to 4%. Doctors in Nigeria are routinely underpaid and work in deplorable conditions. This is a country where it is not uncommon for surgeries to be carried out by lamps and candles in the absence of reliable electricity.

Amid an economically crushing pandemic, South Africa went the other way – in the national budget recently presented to parliament, it cut its own health funding.

These are the two biggest economies on

the continent – the situation is even starker in smaller countries. Take the tiny nation of Equatorial Guinea, where more than half of its population of 1.4-million people does not have reliable access to clean water – despite the country's immense oil wealth.

Instead of investing in public health infrastructure, too many African leaders borrow heavily and often without discretion to fund infrastructure projects that are painfully over-budget and that no-one is seriously asking for. South Africa is again a case in point: it wants to spend R10-billion (\$700-million) to save South African Airways, the national carrier that has repeatedly failed to turn a profit.

Of course, few African leaders actually have to interact with their own underfunded health systems. When they get sick, they can and do travel at a moment's notice to receive medical attention in European and Asian hospitals.

## **Few African leaders have to interact with their own underfunded health systems**

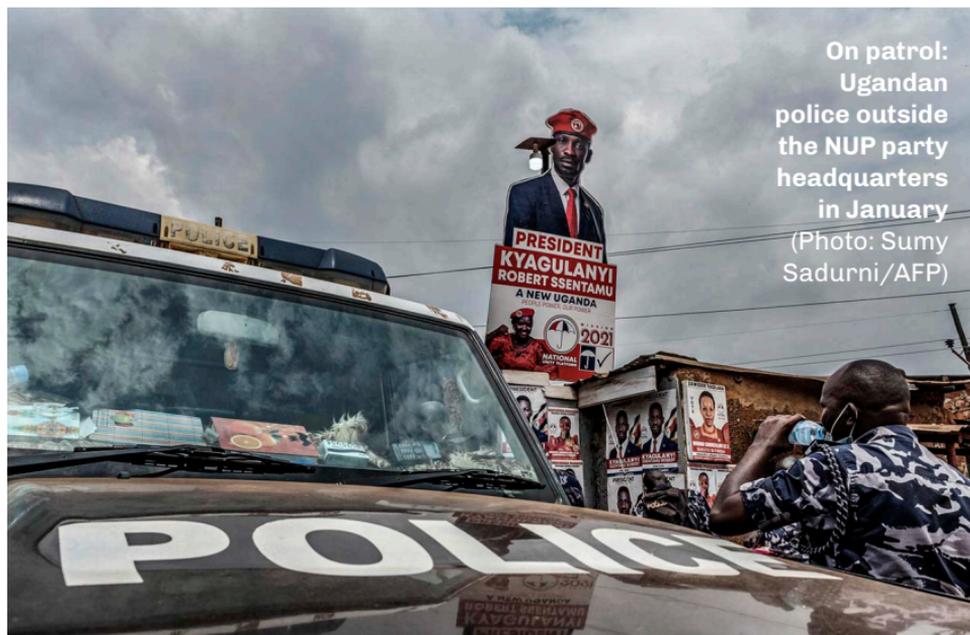
So, yes, we can righteously berate Western nations for hoarding vaccines for themselves. But as we do so we must ask ourselves: Did we really expect anything different from these countries, which were constructed on a foundation of imperialism and colonialism? And, knowing this, why have our leaders failed to free us from this dependency? ■

*Aanu Adeoye is The Continent's news editor.*

# Uganda's ominous return to the dark days of Idi Amin

*Hundreds of opposition supporters have disappeared in the past few months, allegedly at the hands of Uganda's increasingly ruthless and unaccountable security forces. Some turn up in court. Others turn up tortured or dead. Many haven't turned up at all.*

*For Ugandans who lived through Idi Amin, this feels all too familiar.*



On patrol:  
Ugandan  
police outside  
the NUP party  
headquarters  
in January  
(Photo: Somy  
Sadurni/AFP)

**Andrew Arinaitwe  
and Eric Mwine-Mugaju**

**F**abian Luuka was slumped on a hospital bed when we spoke to him. His leg was shattered. Tibia and fibula bones poked through skin. Wounds on his buttocks had become infected and were turning black from severe necrosis.

Luuka said he had been tortured; his injuries are consistent with this claim.

He was allegedly abducted by state security forces in late February, along with two colleagues, Agodri Azori and Obundu, for the alleged “crime” of possessing a (NUP) membership card.

They were not the only ones. In the wake of the disputed presidential

election in January, hundreds of the party's supporters – along with a number of apparently innocent bystanders – have been rounded up by various state security forces. Some have appeared in police prison, others in military detention facilities. Many have not been seen again.

The NUP, led by Kyagulanyi Ssentamu Robert – better known as Bobi Wine – is Uganda's main opposition party. It lost the presidential election in January, according to official results, but Bobi Wine and his colleagues say the election was rigged.

In an apparent effort to prevent civil unrest in the wake of the disputed vote, Ugandan authorities have launched the most brutal crackdown against the opposition in years.

Luuka was caught in the net, along with his friends Agodri Azori and Obindu, also from his home village in Arua.

They died in custody.

After being tortured, Luuka was discarded like litter on the side of the Kampala-Jinja expressway, and later taken to a nearby hospital, where he narrated his ordeal to us. Days later, on March 10, Luuka too succumbed to his injuries.

## **After being tortured, he was discarded like litter on the side of the Kampala-Jinja expressway**

### **An insider speaks out**

Perched on top of one of Kampala's seven hills is Nakasero Hill, an old colonial suburb that is currently home to foreign



**Crackdown: A protester arrested by police officers during a previous roundup of opposition supporters last year.** (Photo: Sumy Sadurni/AFP)

embassies, the State Lodge, and swanky hotels – among them the Serena Hotel, formerly known as Nile Mansions. It was here that Idi Amin, the brutal dictator who ruled Uganda from 1971–1979, founded the State Research Bureau: the notorious intelligence agency responsible for the torture, detention and extrajudicial execution of thousands of Ugandans.

The SRB was shut down when Amin was kicked out of office in 1979. But many Ugandans believe those dark days are back. Just a few miles away, in the less conspicuous suburb of Mbuya, is the headquarters of its modern equivalent: the dreaded Chieftancy of Military Intelligence. The name of this government agency is repeated again and again by torture survivors who spoke to *The Continent*.

Opposition leaders, human rights activists and media reports allege that the Chieftancy has played a key role in executing the recent crackdown. So does one insider who spoke to *The Continent*.

Until recently, Lieutenant Isaac Sankara was the head of the legal department in the directorate of counter terrorism in the Chieftancy. But after witnessing abuses committed by fellow officers in Mbuya, he fled the country in 2020. For his security, *The Continent* is not disclosing his current location.

“You get overwhelmed,” Sankara says. “Some of those people they kidnap and torture would beg, ‘Please, please help me get some treatment.’ They would even refuse them treatment and in a day or two they die. It hurt to see.”

“People were tortured from night to morning. I’ve seen it. Then, for some of the unfortunate abductees, they have the audacity to keep them alive until their wounds heal so that they can bring them to court. [President Yoweri] Museveni has made past bad leaders look very good. So good that if you ask me, ‘Would you rather live under Amin’s regime?’ – I would say yes. My father survived it.”

Sankara fears what will happen if

opposition leaders encourage further protests. “I know the determination of a dictator; they are ready to massacre. I pray guys don’t demonstrate. It will be bloody.”

“The purpose of the current abductions is to threaten the supporters of the opposition and send a strong message. If they can arrest Bobi Wine’s chief bodyguard and his best friend, Nubian Li, and keep him in prison for three months, despite all the lawyers that surround Bobi Wine, then what chance do *you* have, a common man?”

### The drone wars

In late December, on the campaign trail, Bobi Wine was poised to address a rally in Kalangala. But before he could give his speech, soldiers stormed the venue. Bobi Wine himself was seized and airlifted to his home in Kampala. Of the 127 others detained at Kalangala Island, 49 were arrested, including his chief bodyguard Eddy Mutwe, and Nubian Li, a famous musician. Despite being civilians, they were charged in a military court.

Nubian Li’s wife told *The Continent*: “I pray they release him since he has no case and no civilian should be brought to military court, they should follow the truth and permit our institutions to work independently.”

Arrested alongside Nubian Li and Eddy Mutwe was Ntege Williams. The father of seven remembers being transferred between five prisons before he finally ended up in Kitalya Maximum Security Prison.

“The food is poor, the sleeping arrangements are the worst. The



**Red tide: NUP ‘rallies’ often took the form of a slow drive along the street. Police cracked down on these. Hard.** (Photo: Sumy Sadurni/AFP)

congestion was appalling: Covid-19 regulations do not apply,” says Ntege, who is now out on bail. He must report to court every two weeks, and is being treated for a skin disease he acquired in prison.

In the meantime, he has gone into hiding in Kampala – it is too dangerous to be at home. “Anti-drone *zifuuse* drones,” he said in Luganda. The drones have become a big problem.

Minivans with tinted windows, known locally as ‘drones’, have become a new symbol of oppression. Security forces have developed a reputation for careering around town in the vehicles, snatching opposition supporters off the streets in broad daylight.

“I see the days of *panda gari* have returned”, said Muhammad Ssegirinya, a newly elected legislator representing Kawempe North, who is popular for his political humour. *Panda gari* is Kiswahili for ‘get in the truck’. It was a popular phrase during Idi Amin’s brutal regime, when people were abducted by trucks – many never to be seen again.

Muhammad says he now spends much of his time collecting food donations such as rice, matooke, maize flour and much more for families whose breadwinners are incarcerated in Kitalya. This has made him a target for authorities, who have questioned his academic credentials.

### ‘We got him’

Martin Owen Muwanga, 34, a well-known community radio broadcaster and newly elected local councillor for the NUP, is all too familiar with the threat from the “drones”.



**Escape: Broadcaster Martin Owen Muwanga has gone into hiding.**  
(Photo: Kelvin Kavuma/The Continent)

When *The Continent* arrives at his home in Kyengera town, west of Kampala, the kids in the compound stopped playing. Muwanga peers through his living room curtains to gauge whether we are a threat. A man from the area who guided us to his house, convinces him that we have only come to gather news; nothing more. Satisfied that we pose no danger, Muwanga tells us his story.

It was March 2, a day like any other, and he was just ending his radio show. The last words he heard his colleague say on-air were: “We’ve come to the end of our broadcast; respect the curfew guidelines

and let's meet another day.”

As he was packing up, he heard a man's voice say: “*Tumufunye!*” We got him.

“They didn't introduce themselves; they had guns. One security official insisted that the radio had been persuading people to participate in a protest,” says Muwanga. But that wasn't true, he says.

“They started walking me to the waiting drone, and the commander asked me: ‘Why do you support Kyagulanyi?’ When Muwanga heard these words, he knew he was in trouble. Some of his colleagues had already been taken in this manner, and could not be traced. Others had been found dead.

There was no one else around – he could not call for help. So he decided to make a break for it. “I saw another ‘drone’ arriving. As the van approached, I decided to quickly unravel myself and set myself free from the hands of a distracted officer, and dashed into the darkness.”

After his escape, the security forces went to his home: “They hit the doors and broke the glass, entrance,” says his wife, Grace Nakazzi. But their search yielded nothing.

Police spokesperson Luke Owoyesigire later defended the raid on national television, claiming that the arrests took place because Muwanga was asking people to shut down shops to participate in illegal protests.

Following Muwanga's escape from the drone, more than 18 people from his area have been abducted. Among them was newly elected Local Council Five councillor Tomusange Ssebugwawo, one of the few who was able to secure his

release. The others have not been heard from, nor have they appeared in court.

Ssebugwawo told *The Continent*: “People still come to me asking for their missing persons, but I fear to let them know of the outcome, as I am sure they are dead.”

### **Museveni responds**

The gruesome images of men and women with terrible injuries being dumped by the side of the road and outside hospital gates eventually became too much for President Museveni – who has been in power since 1986 – to ignore. In an address to the nation on February 13, he firmly denied that the state was in any way responsible.

“The talk of disappearances should be ignored because it can't happen under the [ruling party],” he said. “We never cover up, there's nothing which we do and hide.”

Yet, in the same speech, the president said that a commando unit had arrested 242 suspects, of whom 177 had been granted bail or released.

### **According to Museveni, “talk of disappearances should be ignored because it can't happen under the [ruling party]”**

On March 13, in another televised address, President Museveni said that those missing were either in court or were “renegotiating” their way out of prison.

“I would therefore want all the others involved in these criminalities to admit



**Commander-in-chief: Yoweri Museveni addresses police officers in early March.** (Photo: Ugandan Presidency)

their mistakes, cooperate with the security forces, apologise to those who were attacked, so that we go back to normal life, but this should never happen again,” he said.

Few are buying the president’s denials.

In response to Museveni’s latest speech, NUP president Bobi Wine – who has previously described the president as worse than Idi Amin – released the names of more than 400 people who he says have been abducted, most of whom are unaccounted for. He said in February that 3,000 of his supporters have been detained or abducted by security forces.

In Buganda, the powerful kingdom in central Uganda where Bobi Wine won most of his votes, the region’s prime minister Charles Peter Mayiga was unequivocal: “Many people have been killed in broad daylight. So many.

Others have been knocked by vehicles with intent. Others had guns pointed at them and eventually shot them.”

With abductions continuing, Mayiga is concerned about what comes next: “A nation can never stabilise when instability prevails. Instability gives birth to more instability, and when instability thrives it sweeps everyone regardless of status.”

The abductions have also drawn international attention. “The recent spate of enforced disappearances has only compounded the intense climate of fear in Uganda following the recent violent national elections,” said Oryem Nyeko, Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The authorities should urgently investigate these disappearances and other abuses and hold those responsible, including members of security forces, to account.” ■



**Suomɔ Hi Fe Shika, Oduro Frimpong Collections.** (Photo: Nubuke Foundation)

## **Suomɔ Hi Fe Shika – 'Love is better than money'**

*On March 6, Nubuke Foundation Gallery, a private visual art institution in Accra, opened the Suomɔ Hi Fe Shika exhibition. The title is a Ga phrase that translates to 'Love is better than money', a statement that is prevalent in Ghanaian culture and one that appears on one of the signs being exhibited.*

### **Wynona Mutisi**

**S***uomɔ Hi Fe Shika* is a collection of hand-painted posters and signage from popular films, salons and barbershops emblematic of Ghanaian visual popular culture. The collection belongs to Dr Joseph Oduro-Frimpong and they are an extension of his academic

research. The artists included in this exhibition are Alpha and Omega, Awal Shetty, Billy, CA Wisely, DA Jasper, Faith Art, Leonardo Arts and OA Heavy-J.

The salon and barbershop signs are a testament to the spaces they are intended to inhabit; the words they bear inspire discussion: messages and slogans that advise, encourage and stimulate pride,

# SAY NO TO BRAZILLIAN HAIR GROOMING PALACE



**Say No to Brazilian Hair Grooming Palace, Oduro Frimpong Collections.**  
(Photo:Nubuke Foundation)

## Nipa Ye Bad HAIR BRAIDS



## SURO NIPA



## BARBERING

**Nipa Y3 Bad Hair Braids, Suro Nipa Barbering, Oduro Frimpong Collections.**  
(Photo:Nubuke Foundation)

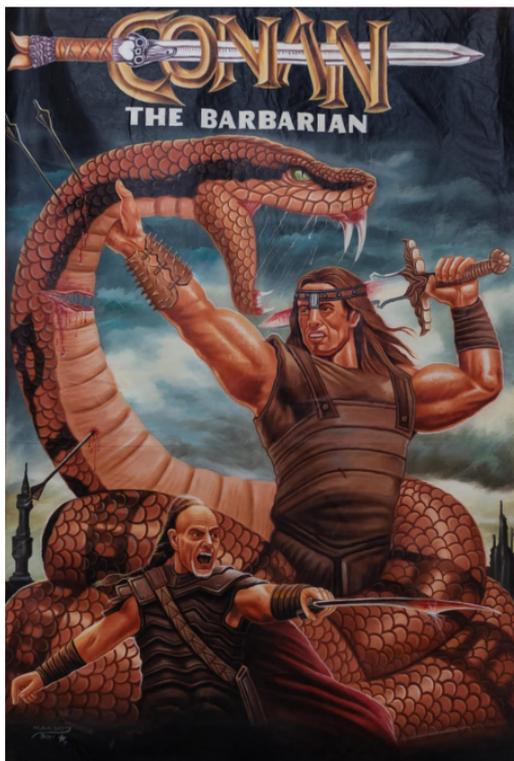
much like the conversations known to take place within these spaces. “Love is better than money” then becomes fitting for a display of this kind.

African salons and barbershops typically share a similar philosophy, that theirs is a space that is more than just a people come to look beautiful or groomed. Instead, culture is passed down here;

wisdom, opinions and beliefs circulate.

The film posters, meanwhile, are an ode to the 1980s, when video cassettes were popular and a small-scale industry of film distribution was growing in Ghana.

In order to attract business, and in the absence of “official” marketing paraphernalia, posters were painted by hand. Some popular films include *Shaolin*



vs *Ninja*, *Conan the Barbarian* as well as the earliest homegrown films like *Diabolo* and Ghana's first video movie, *Zinabu*.

They evoke a wave of nostalgia for those who grew up watching these films. The artists' renditions also offer up their own perspective and understanding of the films as they do not simply reproduce the original film posters. This collection, then – like the medium itself – showcases the skill and mastery of the hands that put paint to canvas.

*Suwɔɔ Hi Fe Shika* is an invitation to imagine the spaces in which the posters and signage originally functioned.

It is just as much a call to reflect on the politics of hair and beauty as it is an

appreciation of salon and barbershop culture, and a celebration of film. ■



**From top left: *Zinabu*, *Conan the Barbarian*, *Shaolin Vs Ninja*, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Oduro Frimpong Collections. (Photos:Nubuke Foundation)**

# Has Netflix changed Nollywood?

Its arrival sparked hopes that critics of Nigerian film quality will finally just chill

Dika Ofoma

Netflix arrived in Nigeria with a splash. The announcement of the streaming giant's entry into Africa's biggest market was made at a star-studded gala in Lagos in late February, just weeks before Nigeria went into lockdown. At the same time, Netflix revealed that Nigeria's first Netflix Original series was in the works, to be produced by South Africa-based filmmaker Akin Omotoso.

Since then, there has been a deluge of Nigerian content onto the platform, with FilmOne Entertainment – Nigeria's largest cinema distribution company – serving as aggregator for this licensing deal. This ensured that the Nigerian audience were not left starved for entertainment as cinemas remained closed for months, even after lockdown.

While most of the titles were films that had just been in cinemas the year before, older and smaller films like *Okechukwu Oku's Black Rose*, which did not get a wide cinema distribution at the time of its initial release in 2018, gained an



opportunity to meet a wider audience.

Apart from old and new titles being re-released on the platform, a couple of Nollywood films scheduled or planned for cinema release were acquired by Netflix as originals.

The Mo Abudu-produced *Oloture*, a film shining light on the sex trafficking crisis in Nigeria became the second Netflix Nigerian original film after Genevieve Nnaji's 2018 *Lionheart*.

Next was Kunle Afolayan's *Citation*, a movie exposing the epidemic sex-for-grades situation in Nigerian universities. And just last month, the Nollywood-Bollywood collaboration *Namaste Wahala*, intended to hit cinemas last April, made its way to the platform as a Netflix Original.



The sequel to Kemi Adetiba's 2018 hit film *King of Boys* will be released sometime this year as an original, too.

Netflix also struck a deal with Mo Abudu's production company EbonyLife Films: the series *Castle and Castle*, which was uploaded on the platform in March 2020, has been renewed by Netflix for a second season; and the sequel to the production house's 2018 comedy *Chief Daddy* has been pegged as an exclusive release on Netflix.

EbonyLife Films will also be producing other original films and series for the streaming platform, including the adaptation of literary works by Wole Soyinka and Lola Shoneyin; the play *Death and the King's Horseman*; and the novel *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*.

There is plenty more original content to come.

The film production company Inkblot Productions, makers of some of Nollywood's biggest cinema releases, has a contract to produce a young adult series. And earlier this month director Kunle Afolayan revealed that he is partnering with Netflix for three new films, one being the adaptation of Nigerian writer Sefi Atta's *Swallow*.

## Quantity over quality

Nollywood has often cited budget constraints to explain away shoddy storytelling, or excuse the failure to explore beyond the tried-and-tested melodramas and slapstick comedies. But those hoping that this formula would change with the arrival of Netflix – and its resources – have been sorely disappointed.

According to Daniel Okechukwu, a Lagos-based critic, more money shouldn't make a difference: "If Nollywood wants to make better films, it will. It doesn't need Netflix to do that and, so far, the partnership hasn't affected quality."

Wilfred Okiche – an experienced critic who has reviewed movies for *The Continent* – is a little more optimistic: "It's a win-win for both. The films are underwhelming, critically, but Netflix is more interested in quantity I suppose. To drive subscription levels."

It's a little too early to pronounce final judgment, as none of the Netflix-commissioned projects have yet been released – not even the Akin Omotoso series that heralded Netflix's entry. Netflix has simply been uploading already produced films onto the platform in different acquisition deals.

Budding filmmaker Fiyin Gambo thinks the partnership will ultimately raise storytelling standards – it just needs time. "They have the right investment in these projects. Once you have that funds, there's a lot more you can play with," he told *The Continent*. "They are also trying to absorb younger talent, training the next generation of filmmakers. Which is a very fantastic move." ■

# Ethiopia's new exiles

**The civil war in Tigray has forced more than 50,000 people to flee Ethiopia. These are just a few of their stories.**

**Aanu Adeoye and Lucy Kassa**

**T**he gunshots rang out as Weyni Abreha was having beers with a group of friends at about 10pm on November 3. At first, they thought it was the work of the often overzealous local police officers in Mekelle, the regional capital of Ethiopia's Tigray province.

Little did they know that what they were hearing was the opening salvo in Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's war against his former allies in the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which led the regional government. Abiy had accused the regional leaders of orchestrating an assault on a national military base with the aim of stealing weapons – this was his response.

By the time Abiy officially declared war in a Facebook post in the early hours of November 4, Abreha had lost internet and phone connection, and electricity had gone, too. Abreha describes a community gripped by fear and chaos as the civil war unfolded. Banks were closed, and residents went days without groceries because they couldn't withdraw money. As the war intensified, groceries became the least of their worries.

The period in late November after the national government gave TPLF forces 72 hours to surrender was particularly tough for Abreha's family, which included her mother and two younger brothers aged 25 and 16. "There were shellings and airstrikes, it was a very difficult time," Abreha told *The Continent* in a recent interview.

Her family, who lived in the Adishmdihun neighbourhood of Mekelle, were forced to flee from their home to Debri after a nearby school was shelled early one morning. The bombardment mostly stopped after Ethiopian forces gained control of Tigray, but soon a new terror took hold: soldiers went from door to door, searching homes for TPLF leaders – and leaving a trail of dead bodies and raped women in their wake. Abreha said she knew of two young men who were killed for violating the nightly

curfew, an account confirmed by the Red Cross.

The 27-year-old, who had spent the past three years shuffling between Tigray and Nairobi, Kenya, where her husband works as a journalist, no longer felt safe in the place she called home. "I thought I was somewhere illegally. I didn't feel like this was the city I grew up in. I couldn't move freely, we were at home all day," she said. "It was so tough. So difficult."

She has since decamped to Nairobi. At Bole Airport in Addis Ababa, Abreha said, she was grilled by intelligence officers seeking information about any allegiance to the TPLF. Their demeanour changed when they discovered that her husband was a journalist.

"They said, 'You're going to give him information. You have photos, videos, we want to check that.' They checked my phone, they checked my luggage and they were asking me the same questions again and again."

Abreha is one of the nearly 50,000 Tigrayans who have fled the country in what the United Nations described as the worst refugee crisis for Ethiopia in more than two decades.

## Secret atrocities

The accounts of the civil war are complicated by the internet and telephone blackouts that heralded the fighting last year. TPLF forces and allied militias have been accused of atrocities, but there are credible allegations that Ethiopian and Eritrean forces killed civilians on multiple occasions. For weeks, both governments denied the presence of Eritrean troops in the conflict. But this week, in an appearance before lawmakers, Abiy acknowledged the presence of Eritrean troops for the first time, and said the forces would soon be withdrawn.

One of the first massacres to be documented took place in early November in the town of Mai Kadra, near Ethiopia's border with Sudan. Armed forces on all sides committed atrocities here over a 24-hour period that likely led to the death of hundreds of civilians, according to Amnesty International.

Lemlem\*, 29, was at a cafe she owned with her two brothers and cousin in Mai Kadra on November 9 when four axe-wielding Amharic-speaking men walked in. When the attackers discovered the business belonged to Tigrayans, they hacked one of her brothers and a cousin to death. Lemlem managed to escape with her older brother, Meauz, to Shire and stayed until Eritrean forces took control of the town.

It was in Enda Selase, Lemlem said, that she was gang-raped by 20 Eritrean soldiers who took her and about 10 other women and took turns assaulting and taunting them until they passed out.

“When the first soldier came and ordered me to open my legs, I tried to defend myself. But he picked a sharp wood and stabbed me twice in my lap. I bled and cried out in pain,” she told *The Continent*, speaking from Nairobi. “I remember their faces. The scar on their face still comes in my nightmares.” Lemlem and her brother eventually made it to Wukro where they were confronted by Ethiopian forces. Her brother was killed. She had to leave his body behind to escape, making it to Kenya through the Moyale border. She doesn’t know if her husband and mother are still alive.

### **Stalked and singled out**

The conflict has impacted not just people living in Tigray, but also Tigrayans living in other parts of Ethiopia.

Hadas\* is a 25-year-old woman who lived in Addis Ababa, where she worked for a major international organisation. She told *The Continent* that a scary encounter with a police officer was her cue to leave.

“I was talking to one of my friends in Tigrinya language and a policeman stopped me and asked if I was speaking Tigrinya and I said yes. He said, ‘Interrupt your call and show me all your social media apps.’ And I asked him why but he said ‘do as I say,’ she said.

“I unlocked my phone and showed him everything. He couldn’t find anything because this happened to a friend of mine three days earlier, so she told me whenever I leave the house please make sure you uninstall every social media application on your phone. He couldn’t find anything and he asked me a lot of irrelevant questions. He didn’t have the authority to do that but he did it anyway.”

The next evening she noticed that two police officers were following her as she walked home from, and was spooked by the experience. Her friends and family within the Tigrayan community living in Addis have reported similar stories of harassment and intimidation.

On her way out of the country, Hadas was also grilled at Bole Airport. She says she was only allowed to proceed when her interrogators found out who she worked for. She made her way to a country in West Africa, where she has friends. She has had to leave behind a reasonably well-paying job and her family – and doesn’t believe it will be safe for her to return home any time soon. “To be honest, it’s frustrating going through all of this. Not having a job and not being certain about the future is worrisome. But the one thing I know for sure is that anything is better than staying in Addis or Tigray.” ■

\*The names of some interviewees have been changed to protect their identity

# Blame it on the bogeyman

Samira Sawlani

What is the one thing you miss most about life before... well, before all of this?

As a dignified member of the fourth estate, your devoted columnist would have to say that what she misses most are the natural freedoms of democracy that perhaps not all of us enjoyed, but to which it at least seemed possible to aspire.

What we miss SECOND-most of all, however, is a no-holds-barred, no-heels-too-high, no-beats-too-loud, no-paint-too-red, honest-to-goodness night out on the town.

Is that shock we see upon your face? Dear reader, do not frown. Is not the greatest virtue of our shared humanity our capacity to get *down*?

We miss it. We miss the basic human right to dance all night, shut down the club and be shooed out into the eye-watering dawn of a brand new day.

## Don't blame it on the sunshine

The only thing getting shut down these days (besides borders, the opposition and Piers Morgan, that is) is the internet.

President Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Congo Republic is the latest of our leaders to put the “no” in technocrat, pulling the plug on their citizenry’s ability to interact, engage and keep up with the latest insane Covid-19 conspiracy sent to the family

Whatsapp group. Or, you know, mobilise in anti-electoral-fraud protests.

Uncle Denis was declared winner of the polls this week with a whopping 88.5% of the vote. In his ever-so-humble victory speech, he noted that voters had demonstrated faith in his government’s ability to bounce back and promised to “move towards development”.

We do appreciate a man with moves. But Denis has been in power for 36 years already. What has he been moving towards until now, if not development?

Suddenly we aren’t sure he has the moves required to keep up.

## Don't blame it on the moonlight

One thing the dismantling and denigration of basic human rights and clubbing have in common is that if you want to do it properly, then you gotta look *good*.

After all, the best part of getting *down* is the *get-up*: finding the perfect new outfit to accentuate your best electoral features. Though it’s not that great for the old bank balance – which is why it’s a relief to see old fashions being made new again by none other than the government of Kenya, which this week tried to order the United Nations to close the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps. Again.



**Head's up: A colonial learning institution has agreed to return stolen artefacts to Nigeria.**  
(Photo: University of Aberdeen)

The first time was in April 2015, then it did it again in May 2016. In 2017 the high court pointed out that the order was discriminatory, but all Kenya had to do was wait for the cruel abandonment of survivors of war, disaster and displacement to come back into fashion, and – just like rediscovering that outfit at the back of your wardrobe that you *absolutely* ought to wear again – it has dusted off its old-is-the-new-new callousness and is ready to strut!

Sure, okay, there's a kerfuffle about innocent human beings who are just trying to eke out something resembling a life, yet are being treated as collateral damage in games they neither started nor wish to partake in.

Never mind that, though – it's time to party! Like it's the end of the world.

### **Don't blame it on the good times**

After a year of this pandemic, you may feel like someone's big old ugly boat is blocking up the Suez canal of life.

And you'd be right: in the cold light of

day, it does feel like there's precious little to celebrate. But take heart: what little there is to celebrate has become so much more precious.

In Guinea this week, it was announced that the last Ebola patient has been discharged from the treatment centre in Nzérékoré, and so begins a 42-day countdown to declaring an end to the epidemic.

In Scotland, Aberdeen University has announced it will return to Nigeria a Benin Bronze – one of the artefacts from the Kingdom of Benin (not to be confused with the country of the same name) that was looted by British soldiers in 1897. And in Germany authorities have begun discussions about how best to repatriate similar bronzes in their possession.

And, hey, that's not nothing. It's even worth celebrating.

So... wherever you are right now, stick on some music and have a little dance. And if anyone objects?

Blame it on the boogie. ■

# SO, YOU THINK YOU'RE A REAL PAN- AFRICAN?

Take this quiz to find out how much you really know about our continent

(Photo: GCIS/CC BY-ND)

## How did I do?

WhatsApp 'ANSWERS' to +27 73 805 6068 and we will send you the answers immediately.

**0-4**

"I think I need to start reading more newspapers."

**5-7**

"I can't wait to explore more of this continent."

**8-10**

"I might wave a flag, but I'll never waive my rights"

*Name the countries that these flags belong to.*

1



6



2



7



3



8



4



9



5



10



# The legend of Francis Ngannou

We've seen his strength, witnessed his might — but the story of his path to glory speaks of unstoppable power



Stipe-end:  
Ngannou (right)  
faces Miocic  
this weekend  
in the rematch  
of the century.  
(Photo: Douglas  
P. DeFelice/  
Getty Images)

## Luke Feltham

**F**rancis Ngannou is terrifying. Possibly *the* scariest man in combat sports today. There's no hyperbole in saying that he demolishes his opponents – ruthlessly pummeling them with fists the size of soccer balls. But no less legendary than his power in the cage is the incredible story of his fight for survival that began long before he even entered an arena.

For much of his short career he's been denied the right to any nuance: Built like a cement truck, in many eyes Ngannou

fits the archetype of the thug who uses his brawn to overcome his lack of fight IQ. A brute who can be tamed with technique.

When UFC heavyweight champ Stipe Miocic controlled Ngannou over five rounds in 2018, this narrative seemed to be vindicated. Against one of the world's best fighters he was unable to bring the full extent of his power to bear, ultimately gassing out his enormous frame and falling short in his first shot at the title.

Three years later, he returns in a new bid to strip the gold off the same opponent. This weekend, having climbed his way

diligently – and violently – back up the ladder, Ngannou now seeks to prove that he has become a complete warrior, and put paid to any lingering notion that there is only one dimension to his fight.

But there was always more to him than that. Ngannou came to mixed martial arts (MMA) at the relatively late age of 26. Until then, life had offered far more severe challenges than an octagon ever could.

Raised in the small Cameroonian town of Batié, the young Ngannou had little reason to entertain any notion of global stardom. In poverty's thrall, he says, he laboured in a quarry as a ten-year-old: shovelling heaps of sand into a truck that would be taken to city construction sites.

By childhood's end his prospects had barely improved. Despite picking up boxing, he still saw no way out of the cycle of odd jobs keeping him afloat. But ambition had taken root, a drive that compelled him not just to leave home, but to cross both desert and sea, and *force* his way into Europe.

After traversing the Sahara, he spent a year in Morocco trying to cross the Strait of Gibraltar, a year during which he lived like an "animal", as he tells it. Cross he did, however, to Spain – only to be scooped up and imprisoned thanks to his illegal landing. But events conspired to return to Ngannou his liberty and, after two months he was free to move on to his destination: Paris, France. Where he knew no one and had nothing except that which he'd brought with him: an iron will, a body of steel, and fists made of pure vibranium.

Eventually, he convinced a coach to take a shot on him and, when he was

finally able to enter the ring, the sheer force of his punch raised more than just eyebrows: his suddenly *very* invested onlookers suggested he join the growing, much more lucrative realm of MMA ... a sport he had never even heard of.

Less than eight years since that day, the 34-year-old Ngannou is now on the threshold of being dubbed the baddest man on the planet: the informal title bestowed on the incumbent UFC heavyweight king.

### **34-year-old Ngannou is on the threshold of being dubbed the baddest man on the planet: the informal title bestowed on the incumbent heavyweight king**

No longer can he be accused of relying simply on his brawn: he comes to his second bout with Miocic not just as a brawler, but as an experienced fighter with technique, tactics and strategy added to his formidable strength and stamina.

Victory would be extraordinary. While popular African champions Kamaru Usman and Israel Adesanya fly the Nigerian flag proudly, both left the country at a young age, benefitting from the training infrastructure of the United States and New Zealand respectively.

In Ngannou we have an athlete who has forged his own path in the truest sense. Leaving Las Vegas with a belt on Saturday, would be the greatest climax to the most epic saga MMA has ever told. ■

# It's my job to deal with the human cost of Zimbabwe's authoritarian state

**Maureen Kademaunga**

**W**hen I was elected as secretary for social welfare at the Movement of Democracy Change-Alliance, which entails leading the party's human rights portfolio, I gladly took on the challenge. I soon realised my work went beyond providing support systems and strategic planning, and required me to invest every inch of myself in supporting victims of violence: Figures and statistics of human rights abuses instead became people with families and personal aspirations that have been violently disrupted.

One encounter I'll never forget was with an elderly woman who was violently beaten during a disruption of a party gathering by police. Images of her circulated, along with rumours she had died. My team and I traced her and brought her to a doctor.

When I phoned her daughter to inform her, she cried with relief. I then had to explain that her mother had sustained serious head injuries and would have to be operated on. She cried inconsolably.

She, too, was a victim and deserved comfort. I made sure to find something to say to make her pain bearable.

There was much more of the same when many MDC Alliance members were on the receiving end of state-sponsored political violence in a violent clampdown ahead of planned protests in July 2020.

Again, I co-ordinated help for party cadres, visiting one man whose wife, also an activist, had been abducted, forced to drink an unknown substance, stripped naked then dumped somewhere. Others had been badly beaten, some raped.

I am generally empathetic but at times facing this barrage of violence, and lacking the resources needed to really take care of people, it has been overwhelming.

Few of the people who deal with the victims of political violence, trauma and torture have the necessary professional training or equipment.

Instead, we represent a tiny band-aid in a sea of political pain that is rarely seen by the outside world. ■

*Maureen Kademaunga works as the Secretary for Social Welfare for the Movement of Democracy Change-Alliance, This analysis was produced in collaboration with Democracy in Africa.*





## The Big Picture

**Don't test the water: A man jumps over black contaminated water as it flows into the ocean along Hann Bay, in the village of Petit Mbao in Senegal. Once, Hann Bay was considered among the most beautiful stretches of beach in the country, but since becoming one of Senegal's main industrial zones, toxic waste dumped into the ocean via canals and rivers has transformed the coastline. For people living here the pollution has become an all-encompassing hazard: fishermen suffer breakouts of unknown skin diseases, herdsman lose livestock to the toxic waters, and children are falling ill after playing in the ocean. (Photo: John Wessels/AFP)**

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