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Introduction: Time and Imagined Futures in Eastern African Art Forms

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Abstract

This article introduces the NJAS special issue "Art and Imagined Futures in Eastern Africa", edited by Alex Perullo, Claudia Böhme, and Christina Woolner, and has not been peer-reviewed.

Artists in eastern Africa use songs, poems, fiction, cartoons, and other artistic forms to explore their lived experiences and future possibilities. Through their art they can envision alternatives to their current experiences, contest social and political problems, and reveal the dangers of complacency. They can also grapple with regret at missed opportunities or develop a sense of longing for a future that could or should have been had different decisions been made. Through these processes of envisioning and challenging future trajectories, artists illuminate diverse human attitudes toward time, encompassing hopes, aspirations, fears, anger, resentment, and nostalgia. Recognizing the role that artists have in empathizing with and validating the experiences of others, this article provides a framework for comprehending artistic orientations to time that are often fluid, contested, and uneven. It reveals that individuals, including both creators and consumers of art, orient themselves toward different future possibilities as they negotiate their present circumstances and daily struggles. Thus, art serves as a medium through which individuals explore, challenge, critique, and imagine future possibilities, as well as deal with regret at unexplored past opportunities.

Keywords: time; arts; imagined futures; eastern Africa

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About the author

Alex Perullo is Professor of Anthropology at Bryant University in Rhode Island (USA). He has published on a variety of topics including art, law, music economies, and labour in eastern Africa. He has an ethnography titled *Live from Dar es Salaam: Popular Music and Tanzania's Music Economy* and has released a box set of 1940s and 1950s African music called *Listen All Around*. He is currently working on an ethnography on the ways that different populations in Tanzania, including street sellers, transport drivers, and artists, attempt to earn a living in highly competitive and overcrowded urban environments.

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The initial papers for this special issue were part of two conferences panels. The first conference presentations occurred in the panel "Popular Arts, Language, Humor, and Politics in Urban Tanzania", part of the African Studies Association meeting in Boston, USA in November 2019. The second part of the presentations appeared on the panel "Imaginations and Alternative Futures in Eastern African Expressive Art Forms", part of the European Association of Social Anthropologists conference, which took place virtually in July 2020. I want to thank Claudia Böhme for pushing the project forward and toward publication, as well as reviewing the articles and assisting with the peer review process, and Christina Woolner for being willing to assist in reading, editing, and commenting on the drafts of the articles in this special issue, including this introduction. My thanks also to Deo Ngonyani and Uta Reuster-Jahn for their thoughtful comments on this introduction. I am very appreciative of the support from each of my colleagues.

Many artists living and working in eastern Africa use art to explore their social environments. Through their creative endeavours – whether in poetry, fiction writing, visual art, or song – these artists immerse themselves in a sensory exploration of their surroundings. They draw from conversations, news stories, and their own lived realities to document and comment on the world around them. This sensory and social engagement forms the foundation of their artistic processes, allowing artists to translate their lived experiences into captivating forms and narratives.

For many of these same artists, art also presents ideals and values that contest or support their daily realities. Beyond merely depicting their surroundings, artists envision alternatives to their current experiences or reaffirm the possibilities of their future circumstances. This sense of imagining futures for themselves and their communities reveals hopes, aspirations, fears, and concerns about the days ahead. Sometimes they can use their craft to articulate a desire for a better future, challenging existing norms and advocating for positive change. Other times, as is the case with cautionary tales, artists can provide warnings about the future that reveal the dangers and costs of complacency.

The artistic exploration of lived experiences and future possibilities is the focus of this collection of essays. Each of the three authors examines different cultural forms in eastern Africa to comprehend artistic engagements with the present moment and imagined futures. Christina Woolner's article analyses poems, composed by different poets in a debate chain, that both discuss the state of Somaliland and narrate a desire for a future that has a more inclusive and supportive political system. Deo Ngonyani's article focuses on the editorial cartoons of Marco Tibasima, where the cartoons depict problems in Tanzania's education system and a lack of future preparation for the country's youth. Uta Reuster-Jahn explores the life of the author, illustrator, choirmaster, and filmmaker Nicco ye Mbajo, who used his autobiography to divulge regrets from his past and thereby provide warnings for future generations.

Collectively, these articles offer insights into how time is subjectively experienced and/or conceptualized among artists in eastern Africa. Many academic publications question the linear temporal framework used to comprehend peoples and communities throughout the world. In historical studies, for instance, scholars argue that the chronological and single timeline approach restricts accurate interpretations of historical materials, events, and situations. Shahzad Bashir notes that, in surveying scholarly literature on academic representations of Islamic history, one finds "a single timeline, which was established in the nineteenth century and continues to predominate to the present" (2014, 519) This approach restricts useful comprehension and relations to historical Islamic materials, which "contain multiple constructions of time" (Bashir 2014, 520). Moving away from the single timeline approach provides a useful means to see the past as dynamic and living, where many voices, experiences, and ideologies leave a historical record.

For many communities, the past also remains alive in the present. Jennifer Wenzel's work on the Xhosa peoples of South Africa, for instance, discusses a "parallel existence of vigilant ancestors", who oversee and intervene among those who are living. Wenzel notes that this view of time recognizes that the "past is never fully complete" (2009, 26). Instead, individuals can receive and revise the cultural productions of historical movements through conversations between themselves and ancestors, creating a sense that the past can continually be transformed by the living through communications with the dead. Moving research to recognize that historical sources reflect different perspectives, contexts, and voices within societies assists in creating a more pluralistic view of the past. Understanding

that the past remains, in a sense, unfinished, indicates that humans continually recreate and reaffirm the past according to their own relations to time.

Ethnographic studies often advocate similar pluralistic notions of time and perspective. The challenge of this pluralistic approach is often one of representation. In writing about time in anthropological research, Nancy Munn discusses the difficulties of finding "a meta-language to conceptualize something so ordinary and apparently transparent in everyday life" (1992, 116). Her article presents the notion of temporalization, where people live within a time that consists of multiple dimensions, including past-present-future relations, and with diverse connections to people, objects, and spaces that are being made and remade in everyday interactions. Pushing this a step further, the notion of *polytemporality* encourages the view that meaning can be found in personal, local, regional, national, international, political, spiritual, familial, and other modes of time (Helgesson 2014, 557). These modes of time "give shape and meaning to human life" and elude scholarly attempts at representation due to the limitations of language (Helgesson 2014, 557). In other words, while we live through and experience many different relations to time and space, our ability to convey the variety of lived realities remains limited.

Both the historic and the ethnographic discussions articulate a sense of time as living through individuals, communities, and societies. Time as living through individual experiences and memories provides a means to better comprehend the ways that individuals experience, remember, and make decisions in their social worlds. Individuals can "socially construct themselves and their worlds" over their lifetimes through conversations with others about the past or recent events (Pasupathi 2001, 651; Fivush 2008, 2013). Individuals can conflate and merge experiences that occur during their lives into a seamless narrative that, at the time they occurred, were far more turbulent or challenging. They can embellish memories or rearrange information, where facts and knowledge can be recalled in a self-serving manner (Clark et al. 2012; De Brigard et al. 2012). The stories that an individual tells about their own lives can be inaccurate, embellished, or may simply not have occurred (Loftus 2005; Otgaar et al. 2017; Otgaar et al. 2018; Pezdek et al. 1997). The reconstruction of memories and beliefs can change or be validated through information individuals receive from others (Zhang et al. 2022; Zhang et al. 2024). The past and present, in other words, can be transformed to accommodate an individual's view of themselves and their lived realities. Alternatively, people can recall their past as having failed, remembering moments when goals and aspirations were not achieved. In this way, their memories often reveal failed futures: goals that they had established for themselves, which they were unable to attain.

These ways of seeing the past and present entail a specific relation to knowledge. We experience the present and share memories of the past. Even though we embellish, conflate, or revise these memories, they are often drawn from lived experiences, either ours or those of others. The future, however, is unknown to us. The knowledge of what may come can be anticipated, speculated, or hoped for, and can create different expectations. Still, the future remains an orientation without personal experiences and, therefore, without direct knowledge. We draw on our memories and personal views of our social worlds to inform our decisions and shape our future orientations (Schacter et al. 2015). We may be hopeful for a future based on positive lived experiences. We may also have more negative views of the future based on current realities, or even on the sense that the world is in a "moral decline" despite evidence suggesting otherwise (Mastroianni and Gilbert 2023). We may have fantasies about an imagined future even though the current moment contains uncertainty and doubt (Weiss

2004, 20). In each of these orientations – uncertain, speculative, hopeful, doubtful – the future itself remains unknown. It can only be imagined.

The idea of imagining a future becomes a means to reveal something about ourselves. It demonstrates our desires, beliefs, and values in profound ways. If we want to see a change in the world, that can be expressed in the way we depict problems in the present. If we notice an injustice, then our anxiety about the future can be revealed in the ways we describe problems in the current moment. If we believe that our futures are outside of our control, then we may believe that external forces shape the pathways that we take. Rebecca Bryant further discusses this concept as "the future awakening the present" (2020, 16). People orient themselves in the present towards specific anticipated futures, whether these are imminent, like a street vendor expecting to sell a certain number of goods today, or more distant, such as the same vendor saving up to open her own store.

Of course, for some, an imagined future need not be positive or optimistic. Nostalgia, often associated with a sentimental yearning for a past that may no longer exist or may never have existed, can sometimes serve as a vehicle for individuals and communities to grapple with their dissatisfaction with present moments and uncertain futures. Charles Piot's (2010) ethnography *Nostalgia for the Future* explores how Togolese society, once rooted in customs and a sense of continuity with the past, now faces a crisis of identity and purpose. The allure of a different time, marked by slower rhythms and familiar traditions, contrasts starkly with the reality of a present fraught with unfulfilled promises and ruptured traditions. This rupture leads many Togolese to search for ways to flee their country for different opportunities. As Piot writes, "It would not be exaggerating too much to say that everyone in Togo is trying to leave" (2010, 4). This desire to leave reflects a loss of faith in current future trajectories, while simultaneously creating a yearning for a past that no longer exists. In essence, nostalgia becomes a form of resistance, a means to reclaim agency in the face of an uncertain future and a fractured sense of belonging. Svetlana Boym (2007) explains, "In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress." Nostalgia inspires a hopeful vision of a life imagined to have existed in the past or in an alternate timeline diverging from the bleak trajectories of the present.

The three essays in this special issue document multiple orientations toward the future and challenge the idea of a singular, homogeneous, or linear form of African "progress".[1] These essays diverge from many other narratives about African art by either recognizing the plurality of voices involved in shaping future orientations, or documenting the ways in which individuals contend with uncertainty in their futures. Collectively, the articles also suggest that many artists consider politics and politicians to be influential in shaping future orientations. Vincent Crapanzano notes that "one's temporal orientation is perhaps most dramatically conditioned by the political circumstances in which one finds oneself" (2007, 425). While evidence in this special issue and elsewhere suggests many factors that influence one's sense of time and space, politics does play a central role in these essays. Among artists, politics creates anxiety about decisions being made that might only improve the lives of some; it generates concern about corruption and malfeasance that exists within the political class; it instils a fear of incompetence in the making of decisions about the futures of communities and countries; and ultimately, it reveals a common anxiety that the political class might not be working toward a just and

[1] Many authors question the homogeneous form of progress used in development and global movements that work toward a common goal (Nisbet 1994; Piot 2010). This form of progress has been referred to as "one of the enduring myths of the Western world" even though this myth "seems to be losing its grip" (Jordheim 2014, 500).

fair future. This anxiety becomes a common refrain in many of the artistic forms explored in this special issue.

Fluid futures

In the early months of 2023, I conducted interviews on innovative approaches to labour in Tanzania.[2] The project entailed conducting in-depth interviews with a diverse array of individuals engaged in various occupations, ranging from farmers and mechanics to drivers, food vendors, and street sellers. Through these encounters, I sought to gain insights into the strategies used by individuals to secure and sustain their livelihoods in a challenging economic landscape.

As part of the interviews, I delved into participants' perspectives on their futures. Conducting these discussions in Swahili posed a few challenges. Unlike in English, where the concept of "future" is distinctly articulated, Swahili can have a more nuanced approach where the future can be translated as *baadaye*, a term that is most often used for "later", as in "I'll see you later". Alternatively, other terms can be used, such as *siku za mbele* ('the days ahead'), *siku zijazo* ('the days that are coming'), or *mambo yatakayotokea* ('things that will happen'). None of these perfectly capture the meaning of the future, and it is apparent that the future as an idea carries many different meanings depending on the terminology used. *Siku za mbele* can sound positive, for instance, while *mambo yatakayotokea* can often feel confrontational. There is also a different sense of time, where *baadaye* might be the near future, while *siku zijazo* is a more distant point in the future. These linguistic distinctions highlight cultural intricacies embedded within Swahili speakers' perceptions of time.[3]

Given the overarching theme of my research, which centred on understanding individuals' motivations and concerns regarding financial stability, I used the concept of *siku sijazo* ('the days that are coming'). By eliciting reflections on long-term personal well-being, I aimed to uncover insights into the interplay between economic dynamics and individual aspirations within the Tanzanian labour landscape. The responses from individuals revealed a range of human emotions regarding the future. Many responded that they had no fear of the future and, instead, focused on the concerns of the present day. Particularly relevant in their discussions was the sentiment that an individual can only deal with and handle the ills of the current moment, and does not need to dwell on the problems that may be coming. Sometimes this sentiment was stated very boldly, as in "I have no fears [of the future]",[4] while others emphasized that success in the present leads to achievements in the future. In other words, working hard to make the present better will lead to good things in old age.

Others responses to questions about the

[2] The interviews for this project took place between February 11 and August 19, 2023. All interviews were conducted in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania by the author and James Nindi. In total, 110 individuals were interviewed for the project. Articles from this project will be published in a collection of essays on labour and innovation in Tanzania's economy.

[3] The term *mustakabali*, which is derived the from the Arabic word *mustaqbal*, is also used to refer to the future. However, the term appears to be mostly used in formal contexts by academics and, increasingly, by specialized news organizations. For instance, the Tanzanian television station UTV Tanzania aired a programme on April 9, 2024 that discussed "Mustakabali wa kikokotoo cha wastaafu" 'The Future of Retirement Pensions' (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibrCCaFqshc). The programme spent considerable time explaining formulas for pensions and retirement, a challenging conversation for most people in Tanzania. Conversely, NTV Kenya, the entertainment television station, did a video in the same month asking people if they knew the meaning of the term *mustakabali*. No one who appeared in the video, except for the NTV Kenya reporter, had heard of the term or knew its meaning. You can see a clip of the video here: https://www.tiktok.com/@ntvkenya/video/7346897622357232902.

[4] Anon. #45, interview by Alex Perullo and James Nindi, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, June 22, 2023.

future took a more religious view, stating that humans cannot control or determine the days that are coming; only a Supreme being can do that. Among these responses were those who emphasized the importance of aiding individuals who do not believe in a Supreme Being and those who discussed the need for people to engage in virtuous deeds in this life to secure an afterlife. One transportation driver framed the issue of the future around doing good in this life to reach an afterlife: "What does good mean? For example, if there are things you were doing that do not please God, stop them. If maybe you were not a person of worship, you need to start worshiping".[5] In general, the individuals who answered in this category appeared to be less anxious about their futures as physical beings. They did not use cautionary words, such as fear or trepidation, in their responses to their health, purchasing material items, or reaching old age. Instead, if they expressed any fear, it was for reaching an afterlife having lived a devout life.

A larger group of responses focused on economic and health-related concerns for the future. There were conversations about insurance, being healthy enough to still be active, and not burdening other relatives as one ages. Many discussed plans to save money, build a house, and educate their children to insulate them from future problems. Others noted the challenges in saving enough to be able to cover future expenses. Some revealed specific plans to save for the future, such as a thirty-five year old clothing vendor who stated, "The fear of life will exist if I am not prepared, because you have to invest for old age when you are young. In order to invest, [my husband and I] plan to buy plots in various places where we will be setting up fields for fruit and vegetable cultivation. You save for when you get old so that you will not be a person who cries from hunger".[6] Collectively, these responses illustrated a future that appears unsettled, challenging, and full of struggles. The only way to minimize the challenges is to have a clear plan for the future.

The three types of responses provide an understanding of the multifaceted attitudes many individuals have towards the future. The first group may prioritize living in the present moment. Their focus on immediate experiences may draw from a need to address current problems, revealing that, for some, thinking about the distant future is a luxury. In the second group, there are those who perceive the future as a realm largely beyond individual influence or control. These individuals tend to ascribe greater significance to external forces, societal structures, and systemic factors in shaping the trajectory of their lives. Their perspective underscores a philosophical stance that emphasizes the limited agency of individuals in shaping their own destinies, as well as the removal of personal burdens, by emphasizing the role of the supernatural. In the third and largest group, individuals exhibit a heightened sense of concern regarding potential future challenges, particularly in domains such as health and finances. This group tends to engage in more proactive planning and risk mitigation strategies, driven by a desire to secure stability and well-being in the face of uncertainty.

While these three relations to time appear rather distinct, where an individual only experiences one future-orientation, follow-up

[5] Anon. #76, interview by Alex Perullo and James Nindi, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, August 9, 2023. The original Swahili for the quoted interview is, "Mwema maana yake nini? Kwa mfano kama kuna vitu ulikuwa unavifanya ambavyo havimpendezi Mungu uviache. Kama labda ulikuwa sio mtu wa ibada, sasa uingie kwenye ibada."

[6] Anon. #86, interview by Alex Perullo and James Nindi, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, August 17, 2023. The original Swahili for the quoted interview is, "Hofu ya maisha itakuwepo endapo kama nitakuwa sijajipanga, sababu katika umri huu wa ujana ndio kipindi unachotakiwa uwekeze kwa ajili ya uzee. Kwa hiyo, kwa ajili ya kuwekeza tunajipanga kama kununua viwanja sehemu mbalimbali ambavyo tutakuwa tunaweka mashamba ya kulima mfano matunda na mbogamboga. Unaweka akiba inapofika uzee unakuwa sio mtu wa kulia njaa."

interviews revealed that people's responses to the future fluctuated. Some individuals even exhibited elements of all three categories at different times: on certain days, these individuals leaned towards a more present-focused mindset, while on others, they grappled with concerns about old age and their futures. These shifts in perspective suggest a fluidity in their conceptualization of the future, as they anticipate and hope for different outcomes. It also means that individuals are orienting themselves toward different possibilities as they negotiate their present circumstances. Someone who is ill on one day may feel differently about the future than on a day where they are healthy and vibrant. This fluidity underscores the dynamic nature of human awareness and anticipation, where personal circumstances, as well as financial and political concerns, impact a person's perceptions of the future. The concept of fluid futures asserts that the future is not rigidly predetermined but rather contingent on numerous factors, including social dynamics, economic fluctuations, environmental factors, and personal well-being.

Art often reflects the fluidity of future orientations. In Christina Woolner's article in this special issue, she examines a series of poems by Somalilanders that were produced over a period of two and a half months in early 2017. Nearly a hundred individuals, including those living in Somaliland and those in the broader Somaliland diaspora, contributed to a poetic debate chain, where each poet discussed issues of government credibility, corruption, and inequality with other poets. This specific debate chain, known as *Miimley*, a reference to the type of alliteration used in the poems, provided a means for many voices to deliberate on issues facing those living in Somaliland. The range of voices created a poetic tug-of-war between different conceptions of past events, present circumstances, and future orientations. It was both polytemporal and fluid.

In the poems that Woolner analyses, the turmoil felt by the poets about their country and future possibilities reveals an intermingling of different orientations toward the future. The poet Aar Jaama states, "Our precious youth/ who were waiting for a better future/ graduated from our schools/ when they realized/ how deep the lack of food was/ it disoriented them."[7] The supposition in the poem is that educated youth, once hopeful for a future, find themselves in the dire realities of everyday life after they graduate. The transition from hopefulness to desperation disorients the students and presents two possibilities: a world that could have been and one that is more likely to emerge. The poem continues, "without considering the hardship ahead/ they threw themselves into the ocean/ wrapped in hunger…/ Where is the government?" Here Jamaa references the desperation of the country's youth who attempt to migrate by boat from Somaliland to other parts of the world. The perilous journey, which leads to many young people drowning during their voyages, is an outcome of the suffering (hunger) experienced by those who cannot find work. The poet then turns his attention to the government, which appears to be absent and negligent in the face of this suffering.

The issue of problematic politics and political leaders is a central theme in many of these poems. The future of individuals is being challenged by an unsupportive or corrupt political system. In another poem, the Somaliland poet Layla Sagal notes, "what snatches my livelihood/ is a corrupt scavenger, supported by power."[8] The imagery of something being taken away, removed, reveals the way that corrupt political leaders can undermine opportunities and alter a person's ability to earn an honest living. The honest living

[7] The poem is referenced as Aar Jaamac, "Ma Muraad Kala Jira". Excerpts from this poem appear both in the original Somali and in English translation in Woolner's article in this special issue.

[8] Layla Sagal, "Hooyo Maagtay". Excerpts from this poem appear both in the original Somali and in English translation in Woolner's article in this special issue.

becomes one future orientation and dealing with corruption another, illustrating the ways that a person's sense of the future can alter in reaction to external events and circumstances. Both the poems by Jaamac and Sagal articulate conflict between a world that could have been/should have been and a world that emerges because of problematic political leaders. The tension between these future orientations and the many possibilities that could emerge or could have emerged marks the sense of fluidity toward future potentials.

Of course, fluidity is not just a frame used to comprehend artistic creations. The fluidity of imagined futures also impacts artists' own personal views. As much as art reflects the world inhabited by artists, artists themselves also deal with the challenges of future orientations. In an interview with the Kenyan visual artist Wanjiru Kinyua, she explains the challenges she encounters as she negotiates her future as an artist:

> My optimism for the future stems from my inherently positive outlook on life and my unwavering commitment to my artistic dreams. However, the rising cost of living, decreasing number of art buyers, budget cuts limiting job opportunities, and some clients turning to AI does raise concerns about the sustainability of my artistic career. It's challenging to maintain unwavering optimism when the present reality seems bleak. Sometimes, I wonder if my optimism is naive in the face of these challenges. These concerns are not unique to me; many artists are experiencing stagnant pay despite economic changes, wrestling with the rise of AI, and facing a scarcity of job opportunities.[9]

Kinyua's optimism for a future is tempered by the realities in which she creates her art. Will technology undermine her ability to sustain a career? Will the cost of living become too great to maintain a livelihood in art? These questions, and many others, plague artists throughout their careers. The fluidity comes as they find success at one moment – the prosperous exhibition of one's art or the popularity of a song – against the regular struggles that come with building and maintaining a successful career. Contemporary tensions of politics, economics, and technology (e.g. artificial intelligence) factor greatly in the concerns that artists themselves have when thinking about future possibilities.

Shaping the future

Whereas the previous section illustrated the fluidity of futures – many possible futures that can exist simultaneously within an individual or community – there are many artists who use their work to advocate for specific changes to improve future possibilities. As Woolner notes in this special issue, poets advocate for a future in which current problems are transformed. Art, in this sense, operates as a catalyst for social dialogue and a vehicle for getting people to act. Perhaps the action is encouraging people to vote or getting people to advocate for certain rights. The actions become a means to process both the extrinsic realities of lived experiences in the present and aspirations for a better future. Experiencing these artistic forms offers viewers, readers, and listeners a medium through which they can engage with commentary about the world and, akin to a philosophical dialogue, follow potential pathways towards greater hope, justice, and personal fulfilment.

Take the song "Nchi ya Ahadi", released in 2015 by the Tanzanian artist Kala Jeremiah. Jeremiah raps about many problems encountered by Tanzanians, such as the continued use of charcoal stoves (instead of gas), violence

[9] Wanjiru Kinyua, interview via email by Alex Perullo, March 31, 2024.

against young people, and inflated prices for daily necessities. He speaks about people going without food and the poor economic state of the country. In the song, a politician, performed by another rap artist named Roma, responds to Jeremiah's complaints.[10] When Jeremiah makes a direct reference to promises made in previous elections, the politician (Roma) responds with unclear, false, or disingenuous information. Jeremiah points out that the politician promised houses to farmers, desks to students, and medicines to citizens. The politician retorts by explaining that the country is moving forward, prices have risen making purchasing more difficult, or, alternatively, he does not remember saying the things Jeremiah claims he said. As the song builds and the politician argues that, with more time, he can achieve many goals, Jeremiah tells him, "Your responses demonstrate that your abilities are limited, and your responsibilities are too much for you."[11]

The dialogue of "Nchi ya Ahadi" could be considered a reflection on past elections and present circumstances. In this way, it has little to do with the future. However, for Jeremiah and Roma, the song is about addressing the concerns that it documents. It is not meant as a news report or a narrative about present problems but as a means to create change for the future. Even the title of the song plays with the contentions between the present and the future. "Nchi ya Ahadi" is typically translated as "The Promised Land", and is a biblical reference to the land given to Abraham and his descendants by God. It also has a metaphorical meaning of a land where hopes become realities. Alternatively, the song title can be translated as "A Country of Promises", which reflects the idea that political leaders frequently make promises that they cannot fulfil. The dual meaning of the song, reflecting both a contentious present and a hopeful future, illustrates the multiple meanings in the lyrics. At the end of "Nchi ya Ahadi", Jeremiah uses the song to encourage people to take an active role in the politics of their country. He states, "This is what happens every day in this country/ But myself, you, and I can change this situation/ Let's register and vote so we can choose the right leader."[12] The song, in other words, emboldens listeners to be the cause of change by voting for a better leader.

For many artists in eastern Africa, including those who appear in this special issue, embedded in their art is a sense of social justice aimed at improving the future. In writing about visual art in post-apartheid South Africa, Eliza Garnsey argues that "art plays an important role in animating and activating the narratives of individuals so that they take on collective importance. In doing so, the past can be shared so that a new political future can be imagined" (2020, 2). This sense of acknowledging people's experiences, even in mundane actions, such as cooking with charcoal, allows artists to focus on the issues of those living in difficult circumstances. It is a form of recognition that matters to communities, as it reveals a sense of common and shared experiences.

Central to this process is the ability of artists to reveal common issues and affirm people's own feelings about their present circumstances. In psychology and neuroscience, these processes are sometimes referred to as empathic resonance or empathic validation. In empathic resonance, one person can deeply understand and emotionally connect with the experiences, emotions, and perspectives of another individual. In essence, it is the ability to "feel with" someone else (Watson and Greenberg 2009). Empathetic validation refers

[10] Roma has often used the name Roma Mkatoliki for his music, and his birth name is Ibrahim Mussa.

[11] The original Swahili lyric is "Majibu yako tu yanaonyesha umetingwa." The literal translation is "Your response just shows that you have become hemmed in [by your responsibilities]".

[12] The original Swahili lyrics are as follows: "Haya ndiyo yanayotokea kila siku kwenye nchi hii/ Ila mimi wewe na yule tunaweza kubadili hali hii/ Tujiandikishe basi tupige kura tuweze kumchagua kiongozi sahihi."

to the act of acknowledging and affirming the emotions, experiences, and perspectives of another person. It involves actively listening to them, understanding their feelings, and expressing support for what they are going through. The ability of an artist to connect to the experiences of others and validate those experiences in song, poetry, fiction, or visual art holds great significance. Christina Woolner notes that an artist must "*feel* or *empathize* with another" and discuss an experience that resonates with audiences for the artistic form to "stick" (2023, 74). It is part of the reason that artists generate popular works, as they affirm and validate audiences' own sentiments.

For instance, when Jeremiah raps "Electricity in Tanzania is a problem for everyone/ Life has hit us like a punch by Matumla/ Voters go to bed hungry", he is acknowledging shared problems in his use of "everyone" and "us".[13] Life has hit "us" hard, like a punch from the former Tanzanian boxer Rashid Matumla. Even if you voted in the past election, Jeremiah states, we, the voters, sleep hungry. For the millions of people experiencing these issues, Jeremiah's song reveals their common struggles. He also subtly encourages them to change direction. Since most people in the election prior to the release of Jeremiah's song would have voted for the most dominant political party in the country, Chama cha Mapinduzi (the Revolutionary Party), Jeremiah suggests that those votes did not provide food, electricity, or security in people's lives. When he tells them to change the future by voting, he *may* also be suggesting that they vote for an opposition candidate to create real change.[14]

In this special issue, Deo Ngonyani explores the ability of art to validate people's concerns and recommend change, focusing on the cartoons of Marco Tibasima. Tibasima's cartoons depict Tanzania's education system as dysfunctional and on a path toward a grim future, highlighting issues such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities, exam-centric teaching, the abuse of students, and demoralized teachers. The cartoonist acknowledges many of the struggles that parents and children encounter in education. The cartoons also provide a warning about the future problems that could emerge without improvements to education. As Ngonyani notes in his article, "Education prepares young people for the future. With a dysfunctional education system, young people are not acquiring the skills necessary for their lives going forward."

In one cartoon presented in Ngonyani's article, Tibasima depicts a stranded bus, which serves as a metaphor for a failing education system. On the bus are the words "Tutafika kesho" 'We will reach the destination tomorrow', a comment that suggests that educational initiatives are not something that can be achieved today. The bus's missing wheels and flat tyres represent the lack of resources in the education system, without which it cannot function efficiently. As Ngonyani explains, Tibasima condemns the present state of education in the country and warns of a dire future where all citizens (the passengers on the bus) are left stranded and unable to make a difference in the world. His cartoons offer a sense that education, in its currently dysfunctional state, is not allowing the country to move forward. Considering the value that most people in Tanzania place on education – in part a remanent of the country's first president, Julius

[13] The original Swahilu lyrics are "Umeme Tanzania ni tatizo kwa ujumla/ Maisha yametuchapa kama ngumi ya matumla/ Wapiga kura tunalala bila kula."

[14] In later songs, such as "Rafiki", Jeremiah extols the virtues of the ruling party in Tanzania. During this period, which started part way into President John Magufuli's time in office (2015–2021), there was significant censorship of lyrics by government offices. Artists who opposed the ruling party were not permitted to perform. Thus, many artists performed pro-ruling party songs to maintain their artistic careers (see Cultural and Development East Africa 2023). It is, therefore, difficult to know the exact meaning of Jeremiah's vote comments, as they came just prior to increased censorship and the need to perform songs in favour of the country's ruling class.

Nyerere, who strongly advocated for a robust education system – Tibasima's cartoons validate people's sense that a functioning school system would provide a better future for all citizens.

Editorial cartoons provide accessible visual representations of social and political issues. They employ visual metaphors and caricatures to distil intricate topics into compelling and easily digestible images that resonate with audiences (Abraham 2009; Brown-Glaude 2020). They can contribute to the shaping of public opinion and the fostering of civic engagement in pressing political matters. Through their speculative and imaginative depictions, these cartoons can also encourage viewers to consider the broader implications and consequences of societal trends. In this way, editorial cartoons contribute not only to the immediate discourse but also to long-term reflections on the trajectory of political and social developments. There is a future embedded in many editorial cartoons that pushes viewers to question current events, political leaders, or government policies. Ngonyani argues, "A concern for the quality of education is a concern for the future of those receiving education and the society more broadly." Tibasima, then, aims to disrupt the trajectory of the country's education system by pointing out the absurdities of the current problems while validating people's own misgivings. It is in the humour that emerges that the potential for enacting change becomes possible.

Revisiting past futures

In many discussions of imagined futures, a sense of optimism dominates. Part of this stems from a hopefulness that the future must be better than the present. As Arjun Appadurai notes, "it is only through some sort of politics of hope that any society or group can envisage a journey to desirable change in the state of things" (2013, 293). What happens, however, if the present moment becomes disconnected from a future? Many people interviewed in my research treat the future as a luxury: To conceptualize something beyond the immediate needs of food and security becomes something of an impossibility. Or what happens when the future appears unreachable? Eli Thorkelson (2016, 499) argues that, in these circumstances, the future can seem "dystopian, apocalyptic, loathsome, or just lost. In all these cases, the arrow of time has stopped pointing in a good direction, or points in circles, or has become impossible to endorse."

In settings where artists generate conversation about dystopian or apocalyptic futures, there is often a simultaneous discussion of things that could have been done differently to make the future better. Providing adequate funding in the 1980s and 1990s for education in Tanzania, for instance, would have provided better schools and a more hopeful future than that which is documented by Tibasima. Creating jobs for the poor could have removed some of the suffering encountered by those that Jeremiah sings about in his music. Or having a government that represents the decisions of its people could have created a more unified sense of the future for those living in Somaliland. Dwelling on the past to think about what could have been done differently creates alternative futures that are out of reach.

The linguistic concept of the *irrealis mood* denotes a state of unreality or possibility within narratives. It encompasses a spectrum of imagined scenarios, potential outcomes, and hypothetical situations that may diverge from actual events or certainties. In literature, the irrealis mood is often employed to convey dreams, desires, wishes, or speculative ideas that may not align with reality. By incorporating this mood, an author can delve into introspective reflections, contemplating pivotal moments or decisions through the lens of what might have been. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of personal motivations, regrets, or aspirations, inviting readers into the author's inner world where the possibilities

diverge from actual events. For instance, an autobiographer could use the irrealis mood to vividly depict alternate life paths or pivotal turning points, offering a nuanced portrayal of personal growth and self-discovery. This narrative device can transform autobiography from a chronological account of events to an exploration of the human experience through the lens of imagination and speculation.

In this special issue, Uta Reuster-Jahn explores the irrealis mood in the work of the Tanzanian artist Nicco ye Mbajo. Mbajo's memoir provides insights into the life of an artist navigating significant cultural moments in Tanzanian history. He was a pioneering figure in post-independent Tanzania and worked as a writer, magazine editor, illustrator, cartoonist, and choirmaster. His 2020 autobiography *Laiti Ningelijua* (*If Only I Had Known*) delves into his artistic journey, providing a poignant narrative of unrealized potential. By examining Mbajo's life story in conjunction with his artistic output, Reuster-Jahn documents Mbajo's creative works and the formidable obstacles he encountered, such as political constraints, financial struggles, limited training opportunities, and betrayals of trust. According to Mbajo, these past moments hindered his artistic growth and economic prosperity.

Regret becomes a powerful means to suggest unfulfilled potential. At one point in Reuster-Jahn's narrative of Mbajo, she examines his work as an agricultural officer in Tanzania. Mbajo regrets this work, as he would have been better as a teacher. This would have kept him living in the coastal Tanzanian town of Tanga, where he could have continued to work as an artist. This sense of regret for past decisions becomes a narrative for understanding Mbajo's sense of longing for a different past, a nostalgia for an alternative future.

Scholarship on nostalgia often highlights its capacity to foster social bonds and offer psychological solace (Juhl and Biskas 2023), yet, for Mbajo, nostalgia takes on a different meaning, tinged with regret and a sense of inadequacy. Rather than evoking warmth and fondness, his reflective gaze upon his past life reveals layers of disappointment and self-doubt. The warping of past events through the prism of present emotions magnifies the what-ifs and the roads not taken. It prompts the question: What might the future have held if different choices had been made? In his artistic endeavours, including in many of his novels, Mbajo delves into realms of alternative possibilities, reshaping some elements of his own narrative and rewriting history to explore avenues left uncharted, attempting to reconcile regret with the potential for redemption.

Moving forward

In his essay "Time and History", the historian Reinhart Koselleck creates a distinction between experiences and expectations (Koselleck 2002). Experiences refer to the lived moments in which the past resonates with and manifests in the present, shaping individuals' understanding of their identity, society, and historical context. These experiences are not merely passive recollections but active engagements with memory that inform present actions and decisions. Expectations, on the other hand, denote the anticipation of future possibilities, encompassing the hopes, fears, and projections individuals hold for what lies ahead. Unlike experiences, which are grounded in the past, expectations extend into the realm of the unknown, representing potential trajectories that may unfold in the future.

Koselleck's exploration of experiences and expectations offers insight into the ways individuals navigate time, memory, and historical change, underscoring the importance of both past and future orientations in shaping human understanding and action. The acceleration of life through new technologies, rapid communication, and an abundance of information provides less time to experience the present, while also making the future more

contentious and less predictable. Koselleck explains, "The shortening of the time spans necessary for gaining new experiences that the technical-industrial world forces upon us can be described as a historical acceleration" (2002, 113). He supports this idea with a quote from Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities*, where one of the book's characters states that humans must relearn things every five years to remain up to date with trends and social norms. Considering that Goethe wrote his words in the early 19th century, the process of relearning or gaining new experiences occurs more rapidly now, creating further changes to our experiences.

Koselleck's argues that as the space between experiences and expectations continues to grow, individuals encounter instability in their lives. With so much change, the future becomes less clear or less known to individuals. In other words, "the horizon of expectation becomes illegible" (Ross 2012, 103). The essays in this special collection offer a means to comprehend the distinctions between experiences and expectations in eastern Africa. Each essay documents the expectations of individuals and communities as they wrestle with increasing challenges and uncertainties. This makes their knowledge of the future less predictable, thereby creating anxiety, apprehension, or discord about the days ahead. Art and artists provide a means to address the challenges occurring in the present, while attempting to navigate the uncertainty of our expectations.

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