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Contemporary Music and Political Contestations in Zimbabwe: A Critique of the Multivalent Transition Dynamics in Jah Prayzah’s “Kutonga Kwaro” and “Masoja”

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Abstract

This article examines two songs from Jah Prayzah’s *Kutonga Kwaro* album within the context of Zimbabwe’s tumultuous political transition in November 2017. It explores how the songs reflect and influence the power dynamics in Zimbabwe during this period. Through desk research and analysis of digital platforms, the article examines the symbolic interaction between music and society, focusing on how Jah Prayzah’s music resonated with the populace and the military during the transition from Mugabe’s to Mnangagwa’s presidency. The article situates *Kutonga Kwaro* as a cultural artefact that navigates and reflects Zimbabwe’s complex social and political landscape, embodying its people’s collective experiences and aspirations during a significant period of change. The analysis extends to the reception of Jah Prayzah’s music, considering the artist’s portrayal as a political prophet and the debates surrounding the prophetic versus coincidental nature of his album’s themes. It also explores the challenges and criticisms faced by the artist in the aftermath of the political transition, highlighting the delicate balance between artistic expression and political affiliation in Zimbabwe’s charged political environment. The article underscores the transformative power of music in Zimbabwe’s socio-political context, illustrating how *Kutonga Kwaro* became a pivotal part of the narrative surrounding Zimbabwe’s transition to a new political era. It emphasises the multifaceted role of music as a medium for social commentary, cultural expression, and political mobilisation, contributing to the ongoing discourse on the interplay between art and politics in African societies.

Keywords: music; Zimbabwe; Jah Prayzah; Robert Mugabe; Emmerson Mnangagwa; Zimbabwean politics

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Introduction

This article argues that Jah Prayzah's album *Kutonga Kwaro* (2017) serves as a prism through which the interplay of music and political transitions in Zimbabwe can be explored, reflecting the complexities of cultural production amid socio-political change. The tumult surrounding Mukudzei "Jah Prayzah" Mukombe's innuendo-ridden song titles and lyrics has triggered discourses across prophecy, coincidence, paradox, history, divination, political conspiracy, and mystery, especially in the wake of a vortex of nuanced activities attendant to Zimbabwe's epochal political transition of November 2017. Various speculations and claims have been made about the role of Jah Prayzah's music in the 2017 coup in Zimbabwe. However, it is important to note that no concrete evidence suggests that Jah Prayzah's music played a direct role in the coup. The potency of the artist's music underscores the characterisation of music in Africa as the indispensable handmaid to the behaviour and sustainability of "being" of any African person across spheres such as work, politics, socio-economic engagements, religious worship, integral development, and moral life (Mbaegbu 2015). Music thus intersects with human life in many ways, serving as a signifier of multiple meanings in the production, maintenance, and configuration of reality. Kandinsky (1977) immortalises the value of art by noting that when all other realities of life are unhinged by social and cultural upheaval, art stands firm as a spiritual anchor, enabling man to turn his gaze from the ephemeral externals to the eternal spiritual inscape. Quite notably, artists are creative thinkers who provide society with joy, interaction, and inspiration while critically critiquing political, economic, and social systems. In documenting human history and expressing collective sensibilities, artists push communities to engage thoughtfully and make steps towards the collective good and upward social mobility.

In the history of Zimbabwe, music has invariably played its role as the all-pervasive lubricant, oiling revolutions in society's moments of change (Mutize 2024). By projecting the chronicle of political dynamics in his musical compositions, Jah Prayzah becomes an integral figure in Zimbabwe's political transition, to the extent that his telling track "Kutonga Kwaro" is immortalised as the anthemic soundtrack of Emmerson Mnangagwa's rise to the presidency. Significantly, all this happens after an eventful thriller replete with intrigue, conspiracy, threats, surprises, fugitive escapades, ideological contestations, constitutional ambivalences, legal technicalities, and heroic ascendancy to power. Reflective of the proverbial victim-underdog triumphalism, the song's lyrics evoke the ethos of a political rebirth against the backdrop of a receding old order that hardly withstands the torrential forces of change. In this regard, Jah Prayzah escorts the tradition initiated by his predecessors. Like many other musicians before him, including Thomas Mapfumo, Chinx, and LMG Choir, who were credited for boosting morale during the liberation struggle, Jah Prayzah was lauded for music that galvanised the Zimbabwean populace at the dawn of a new dispensation.

In Zimbabwe's political context, praise singers have existed throughout history to buoy morale and validate rulers. However, lauding Jah Prayzah's role risks flattening power

dynamics and ignoring the state's regulation of cultural production. While music undeniably shaped collective identity and dissent, focusing on anthemic soundtracks risks overlooking artists' subversive potential. For example, Thomas Mapfumo faced censorship for critiquing post-independence disenchantment through chimurenga styles, blending Zimbabwean and American influences. Rather than claiming direct cause and effect, it is more useful to examine how political changes in Zimbabwe allowed Jah Prayzah's music to connect with the public, as well as the limits of that connection. Rather than taking claims at face value, an intersectional lens should address whose voices came to define historical narratives and which were omitted or faced backlash. An approach that acknowledges polyvocality and the contingencies of meaning-making offers a more nuanced view of culture's complex relationship with politics in contexts of profound change. Ultimately, reducing analysis to heroic tropes of musical prophets risks obscuring as much as it reveals about these dynamic intersections.

This article focuses on two songs from *Kutonga Kwaro*, the eighth album released by Jah Prayzah. The album contains 14 songs that combine traditional Shona music with contemporary Afropop, as evidenced by the popular duet with Nigerian songstress Yemi Alade on the song "Nziyio Yerudo." Other popular songs from the album that went viral include "Ndin'Ndamubata," "Chengetedza," and "Hello Mama." This article focuses on two tracks, "Kutonga Kwaro" and "Masoja," that directly address the events of November 2017 in Zimbabwe and serve as the basis for the analysis. While the rest of the songs contain interesting innuendos, symbols, and metaphors related to the political theatre in pre-November 2017 Zimbabwe, these two songs directly affect the issues under discussion. Thus, this article highlights the profound impact of music in Zimbabwe's socio-political landscape, as evidenced by the emergence of music (recorded in the military camps in Mozambique sometime in the 1970s) whose lyrics and messages were transposed into war songs to spread revolutionary messages. The idea was to use songs that were familiar to the people to make teaching easier. Most of these songs were purely vocal since instruments were not widely available in the military camps. Most of these sing-along liberation choruses allowed for cheer-driving dance and hand clapping in the background, creating the resultant choreography and a morale-boosting energetic, fast beat (Mutize 2024).

Politics of Music Post-Independence

The symbiotic relationship between music and politics in Zimbabwe underscores the transformative power of art in societal discourse. In its various forms and iterations, Zimbabwean music remains a vibrant expression of the nation's soul, encapsulating its struggles, triumphs, and enduring spirit in the face of adversity (Marongedze 2019). Post-independence, the euphoria of liberation gave way to the realities of nation-building and governance, and the musical narrative evolved accordingly. The early years were marked by celebratory tones, reflecting the optimism of a newly independent Zimbabwe. However, as the political landscape became marred by economic challenges, corruption, and human rights issues, musicians like Oliver Mtukudzi began

to use their platforms to address societal ills, subtly critiquing the government's policies and actions while advocating for social justice and moral leadership (Marongedze 2019). Scholars such as Sibanda (2008), Chikowero (2006), and Willems (2015) have highlighted the political undertones in Oliver Mtukudzi's music, which responded variously to issues of bad governance, poverty, and the suffering of ordinary citizens. They show how Mtukudzi's lyrics were deployed subtly to protest and resist state power. Manyeruke (2022) argues that Tuku engaged with political themes using satire, as seen in his song "Ndiani Asvibisa Matope?" ("Who dirtied the mud?"). This track critiques a failing political system, highlighting mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of accountability for misconduct. Another notable song, "Bvuma" ("Accept"), sparked significant speculation within political circles. Many interpreted it as a subtle commentary on former President Robert Mugabe, suggesting, as the song implies, that he needed to acknowledge his advanced age and step aside from power.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a surge in explicitly political music, coinciding with the rise of the opposition and civil unrest that resulted from escalating economic problems. Songs like Clive Malunga's "Nesango" (see below for a more detailed analysis) resonated with the frustrations of war veterans and the general populace, articulating their disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of independence (Helliker, Bhatasara, and Chiweshe 2021). This period underscored music's role as entertainment and a medium for political commentary and dissent. The contentious land reform programme and subsequent international isolation further polarised Zimbabwean society, a division mirrored in the era's music. Artists were often forced to navigate a complex web of censorship and political pressures, with some aligning with the ruling party and others using allegory and metaphor to express dissent without incurring the authorities' wrath (Willems 2015). This era highlighted the risks of political music in Zimbabwe, demonstrating the government's sensitivity to popular culture's influential power. As Vambe's (1999, 2000) analysis of popular songs in post-independence Zimbabwe shows, these musical texts did not simply accompany political developments but actively narrated and contested emergent social realities, often more candidly than formal political discourse. In a similar vein, the chapters in the edited volume by Muwati, Charamba, and Tembo (2018) on music, nation, and the "crisis years," argue that songs are central to how Zimbabweans imagine the state, negotiate exclusion, and articulate counter-hegemonic visions during periods of intensified hardship. Bringing these insights to bear on contemporary Afropop underscores that Jah Prayzah's work is not an outlier, but part of a longer genealogy in which music operates as a key arena for political meaning-making.

In recent years, the advent of digital media and the internet has revolutionised the music industry, enabling artists to circumvent traditional censorship and reach a global audience. Young artists like Winky D and Jah Prayzah have used digital platforms to comment on socio-political issues, reflecting the concerns of Zimbabwe's youth (Matsilele, Msimanga, and Tshuma 2023). Their music, often laced with political innuendos, speaks to a generation grappling with economic hardship, unemployment,

and a desire for change. The urban grooves and Zimdancehall genres have also emerged as significant musical movements, blending international styles with local rhythms and languages. These genres reflect the globalisation of Zimbabwean music and its role in shaping youth culture and political consciousness. The lyrics often touch on poverty, police brutality, and political frustration, providing a voice to the marginalised and challenging the status quo. Throughout Zimbabwe's political trajectory, music has remained a potent force for expressing its people's collective aspirations, frustrations, and resilience. It has served as a mirror to society, reflecting the changing tides of political fortune and providing its audience with solace, motivation, and a sense of identity. As Zimbabwe continues to navigate its complex political landscape, music will undoubtedly play a crucial role in articulating the nation's narrative, preserving its history, and shaping its future.

The rise of Zimdancehall among urban youths in Zimbabwe also provided another space for expressing political and civic participation. Scholars such as Mate (2012) have explored how young people have appropriated street language within their lyrics to provide insight into youth subjectivities amid the social contradictions of Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political crises. Makwambeni (2017) further adds that Zimdancehall serves as a counterpublic, offering marginalised youths a platform to resist the dominant state-sponsored patriotic discourse. Songs such as Platinum Prince's "Ndeipi Yenyu President" ("What's Up With You, President?") speak directly to young people's disillusionment with Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political situation. As Makwambeni (2017, 248) argues, "Platinum Prince directs President Mugabe's attention to the decay of social services and infrastructure in the high-density town of Chitungwiza, where most ghetto youths reside. Platinum Prince also delves into the collapsed economy and the nagging issue of unemployment, which concerns most Zimbabwean urban youths." Gukurume (2022) further discusses how Zimdancehall music can be seen as a form of protest and provides a space for marginalised youth to express their needs and aspirations. It is a space through which young people use music to speak truth to power.

Clive Malunga's "Nesango" as an Example of Music's Mobilising Force

Clive Malunga's "Nesango" (1997) poignantly reminds us of the sacrifices made by war veterans in Zimbabwe and the ongoing struggle to fulfil the promises of the liberation war (Helliker, Bhatasara, and Chiweshe 2021). Its impact on the veterans' demands and its role in shaping the national conversation around post-independence challenges highlight the intersection of music, politics, and social justice in Zimbabwe's history. The song's lyrics subtly critique the government's failure to recognise and compensate the liberation war fighters adequately; many were impoverished and felt neglected by the state they helped forge. The release of "Nesango" coincided with heightened demands by war veterans for recognition, respect, and compensation for their sacrifices during the liberation struggle. The veterans advocated for pensions, land, and other benefits, which they believed were due to them for their role in liberating Zimbabwe from colonial rule (Musiyiwa 2013). Malunga's song, with its emotive appeal and

historical references, became an anthem for these demands, encapsulating the veterans' frustrations and aspirations.

The impact of "Nesango" on the war veterans' movement and broader Zimbabwean society was multifaceted. On one level, it gave voice to the voiceless, articulating war veterans' grievances in a way that was both accessible and moving (Helliker, Bhatasara, and Chiweshe 2021). It helped raise public awareness of the issues facing war veterans, generating sympathy and support from across society. On another level, "Nesango" was a soft resistance, challenging the government's narrative and policies regarding war veterans without overtly confronting the state (Musiyiwa 2013). The song's popularity and resonance with the veterans' cause pressured the government to address their demands, leading to negotiations and concessions in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Furthermore, "Nesango" underscored the power of music as a tool for political and social mobilisation in Zimbabwe. It demonstrated how songs could transcend entertainment, becoming catalysts for dialogue, reflection, and action on pressing national issues. Building on the legacy of politically charged music exemplified by Clive Malunga's "Nesango," the discussion now turns to Thomas Mapfumo, whose works further intertwine music with Zimbabwe's political fabric.

Thomas Mapfumo and the Politics of Music in Everyday Zimbabwe

The intersection of politics and music in Zimbabwe is only complete by speaking to the career of Thomas Mapfumo. Thomas Mapfumo, dubbed the Lion of Zimbabwe, is more than just a musician (Mpondi 2004); he is a pivotal figure whose music intricately weaves the political narrative of Zimbabwe from the colonial era through the independence struggle to the nation's contemporary challenges. Mapfumo's music, deeply rooted in traditional Shona mbira music, transformed into a formidable voice of resistance, unity, and social commentary, making him an emblematic figure in Zimbabwe's political and cultural landscape (Eyre 2015). In the 1970s, during the height of the liberation struggle against colonial rule, Mapfumo's music took a decidedly political turn. His songs, sung in Shona, resonated deeply with ordinary Zimbabweans engaged in a fierce battle for independence. One of his most famous songs from this era, "Hokoyo" ("Watch Out"), was a stark warning to the colonial regime, symbolising the rising tide of African nationalism and the inevitable fall of colonial oppression (Mapfumo 1976). Mapfumo's music became synonymous with the struggle for freedom, embodying the aspirations and resilience of the Zimbabwean people (Marara 2023).

Following Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, Mapfumo's music was a critical voice in the post-colonial era. His songs began to reflect the challenges of neocolonialism, corruption, and the betrayal of the revolutionary ideals that had fuelled the independence struggle. In songs like "Corruption in the Society" (1989), Mapfumo lamented the loss of moral and ethical leadership in the newly independent Zimbabwe (Muranda, Chimbudzi, and Magaraushe 2022). His forthright criticism of Robert Mugabe's government, especially amid increasing authoritarianism and economic collapse,

highlighted the disillusionment of many Zimbabweans with the post-independence trajectory of their country. Mapfumo's outspokenness inevitably put him at odds with the Zimbabwean government. While celebrated by the masses, the authorities perceived his music as subversive (Marara 2023). This tension culminated in censorship and harassment, including bans on his music. Despite these challenges, Mapfumo remained undeterred, his music becoming a form of resistance against the misuse of power and the erosion of democratic freedoms in Zimbabwe. In recent years, Mapfumo has continued to use his music as a platform for political commentary despite living in exile. Furthermore, Mapfumo's music reflects the broader themes of African resistance and post-colonial identity. His work resonates with the experiences of many African countries grappling with the legacies of colonialism, the challenges of nation-building, and the struggle for authentic leadership (Muranda, Chimbudzi, and Magaraushe 2022).

The Fall of Robert Mugabe

It is important at this juncture to outline the events surrounding the fall of Robert Mugabe in November 2017 to provide contextual grounding for Jah Prayzah's album. While there is a long history of factional fighting within ZANU-PF, this article concentrates on the contestations between Grace Mugabe and Emmerson Mnangagwa. The coup, also known by the preferred political term "military-assisted transition," was prompted by tensions between Mugabe and Mnangagwa, widely seen as Mugabe's likely successor until he was dismissed as vice-president in early November 2017 (Motsi and Kurebwa 2020). His dismissal followed increased tensions between the two factions, which became public through rallies led by Grace Mugabe, during which she berated Mnangagwa. Mamvura (2021, 2284) notes:

Grace Mugabe embarked on nationwide rallies that went under the name "Presidential Youth Interface Rallies" and seized every available opportunity to attack and demean Mnangagwa. Grace Mugabe's allies, Kudzanai Chipanga, Jonathan Moyo, Mandiitawepi Chimene, and Sarah Mahoka, also attacked Mnangagwa whenever they got the chance to do so. Chimene, the then Manicaland Provincial Affairs minister, asked President Mugabe to fire Mnangagwa from both the party and government.

The last straw was a rally in Bulawayo at which Robert Mugabe castigated his vice-president. Within a day, Mnangagwa was fired from his post (Burke 2017). Subsequently, he fled the country, citing concerns for his safety. The firing of Mnangagwa was a precursor to the coup. On 14 November 2017, the Zimbabwean military launched a military intervention to target criminals around Mugabe, took control of key institutions, including state-run media, and placed Mugabe under house arrest (Motsi and Kurebwa 2020). After several days of negotiations between Mugabe and the military, Mugabe finally resigned as president on 21 November 2017, following pressure from within his ZANU-PF party and mass protests (Al Jazeera 2017). Mnangagwa was sworn in as Zimbabwe's new president on 24 November 2017. The coup was largely bloodless, and the military emphasised that it was not a coup but rather a "correction" of the political process. The events were widely celebrated in Zimbabwe

and seen as a potential turning point for the country, which had been plagued by political and economic instability under Mugabe's rule.

Locating Jah Prayzah in Post-Colonial Zimbabwean Scholarship

Jah Prayzah has occupied an important space in scholarship on music and politics in post-2010 Zimbabwe. He served as an ambassador for the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) and notably had Emmerson Mnangagwa as guest of honour during the launch of his earlier album, *Jerusarema*, in 2015 (Chese 2015). This section explores a number of scholarly works that focus on the singer and his art. Chitando and Mlambo (2020) analyse how Jah Prayzah's personality, self-presentation, and perceived political affiliations have shaped his reception in Zimbabwe. His music is thus produced, speaks to a specific political epoch, and can be highly polarising depending on listeners' political affiliations (Tivenga 2018, 2021). Supporting this, Matsilele, Msimanga, and Tshuma (2023) show how Winky D (another popular artist viewed as anti-ZANU-PF) and Jah Prayzah use music as an unconventional form of journalism to comment on political trajectories in Zimbabwe. The two are viewed as polarising artists who use their music to propagate their political affiliations and preferences. As Matsilele, Msimanga, and Tshuma (2023, 291) conclude,

Zimbabwe's two popular youthful musicians have been engaging in cold-war-like fights that mirror existential political battles between the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front party (ZANU-PF) led by Emmerson Mnangagwa and the then Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-A) party led by Nelson Chamisa.

Gwekwerere (2021) further notes that, post-2017, Jah Prayzah's music has been co-opted by ZANU-PF into what he termed the grammar of patriotism and legitimacy. This also includes what Munhuweyi (2022) calls the capture of youthful popular musicians, such as Jah Prayzah, by ZANU-PF, to influence and sway the youthful vote. Sauti (2024) focuses on a different aspect, highlighting the relationship between Jah Prayzah's music, culture, and personal reconstruction. He focuses on "Ngwarira Kugarara," the title track from his 2011 album, and "Kwayedza" from his 2020 album *Hokoyo* to highlight cultural norms, a sense of self, and pride in the Shona language and identity (Sauti 2024). What is clear in this analysis is how Jah Prayzah's music has become a central focus in examining the political context of post-2017 Zimbabwe. The current article contributes to this scholarship by exploring the multivalent socio-political dynamics of the album *Kutonga Kwaro*.

Theoretical Framework

In this article we used performativity theory and post-coup discourse analysis as the critical lens through which our submissions are configured. Performativity theory asserts that language and performance shape social realities rather than merely describe pre-existing conditions (Glass and Rose-Redwood 2014). Jah Prayzah's album *Kutonga*

Kwaro can be analysed through this lens by examining how the music intervened in Zimbabwe's political transition process through enactment rather than mere reflection. Songs like "Kutonga Kwaro" did not simply document Mnangagwa's rise but discursively positioned him as the hero of a "new dispensation" through lyrics, music video imagery, and live performances at rallies. The repetition of Mnangagwa's *kutonga kwaro* slogan in an anthemic style imbues it with credibility and emotive force to sway public opinion. By framing him as a liberator against Mugabe's "expired regime," the album contributed to the naturalisation of Mnangagwa's seizure of power and foreclosed debate over its legality. It also consolidated his authority through performances that fused song, dance, and presidential campaigning.

The performance of protest nostalgia in tracks like "Masoja" also reconstructed a teleology in which coup actors inevitably represented popular will, eliding the continued repression of opposition under Mnangagwa. The stylistic blending of genres like chimurenga and rumba enacted a co-option of nationalist symbolism. At live shows, the emotional catharsis and solidarity invoked by collective singing, dancing, and flag-waving to these songs enacted Mnangagwa's rule as a restoration of authentic popular sovereignty, prioritising regime stability over the democratic process. Performativity demonstrates how Jah Prayzah's album operated as cultural commentary and political persuasion per format through discursive practices that materially intervened in the transition's unfolding. Its language reconstituted actors, events, and power dynamics on both societal and structural levels.

Post-coup discourse analysis examines how competing interpretive narratives attempted to assign legitimacy and meanings to Zimbabwe's transitional events (Ndlovu and Chinembiri 2021). *Kutonga Kwaro* appropriated the liberation soundtrack genre to frame the coup as resolving a patriotic struggle against a "finished project." This normalised the military seizure of power by casting it as fulfilment, rather than subversion, of the liberation vision. The album navigated a tightrope, steering clear of direct attacks that risked censorship but voicing ambiguity towards "new dispensation" rhetoric. It recognised competing discourses vying to define the transition and stake claims to authentic nationalism. Through polysemic song structures open to multiple valid interpretations, Jah Prayzah opened discursive opportunities while insulating himself from co-option or silencing by any one narrative. He strategically engaged in discourses to amplify calls for reform, conferring agency without fully endorsing or rejecting the coup's rationale.

Methodological Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the socio-political narratives and cultural implications embedded in Jah Prayzah's album *Kutonga Kwaro*. It employs content analysis as the primary methodological tool, drawing from three key data sources: the lyrical content of selected songs, newspaper articles, and other documented materials related to Jah Prayzah's music. This triangulated approach ensures a

comprehensive understanding of the interplay between music and Zimbabwe’s political transition (Gläser-Zikuda, Hagenauer, and Stephan 2020). The analysis focuses on the lyrical content of two key songs from *Kutonga Kwaro*, namely, “Kutonga Kwaro” and “Masoja.” These tracks were selected owing to their direct relevance to the political events surrounding Robert Mugabe’s resignation and Emmerson Mnangagwa’s rise. The study critically examines the themes of governance, power, and social transformation in the lyrics, emphasising metaphor, symbolism, and historical references. The analysis investigates the performative role of these lyrics in constructing and reflecting socio-political realities during Zimbabwe’s transformative period (Gläser-Zikuda, Hagenauer, and Stephan 2020).

To complement the lyrical analysis, the research incorporates a systematic review of newspaper articles that discuss the album and its socio-political reception (Bauer et al. 2024). Both state-controlled and independent media outlets are examined to understand how Jah Prayzah’s work was represented in the public domain. This review identifies the media’s portrayal of the artist as a cultural and political figure, highlighting public and institutional responses to his music during and after the political transition. The study also considers how various discursive strategies aligned his music with, or positioned it against, dominant political narratives. The research involved analysing relevant documents, including interviews, online commentaries, government communications, and academic discussions on Jah Prayzah’s music. These materials provide a broader context for understanding his evolving public image and role within the cultural-political landscape (Elo et al. 2014). The document analysis focuses on tracing instances of co-option and backlash, and on exploring themes of cultural resistance and the contested space of artistic expression in Zimbabwe.

The data collected from these sources were coded thematically to identify patterns and recurring motifs. Themes such as “political prophecy,” “cultural resistance,” “state co-option,” and “public backlash” were synthesised through thematic analysis, enabling a nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between music and politics. By comparing findings across song lyrics, media reports, and additional documents, the study achieves validation and depth through triangulation, examining both the convergences and discrepancies in the data. This methodological framework positions Jah Prayzah’s music as an active participant in Zimbabwe’s political identity and public consciousness. By situating *Kutonga Kwaro* within a broader discourse on cultural production and political change, the study underscores the performative capacity of music to reflect, shape, and influence socio-political transformations.

Findings and Discussion

***Kutonga Kwaro*: Heralding the New Order**

It is critical to note that Jah Prayzah’s music, especially the 2016 album titled *Mudhara Vachauya*, had become enmeshed in Zimbabwe’s political infrastructure before 2017 (Chitando and Mlambo 2020). *Mudhara Vachauya* became a contested symbol of the

infighting within ZANU-PF between the (Grace) Mugabe-led Generation 40 faction and the Lacoste group with Emmerson Mnangagwa (Chuma, Msimanga, and Tshuma 2020). Following this, 2017 saw the release of Jah Prayzah's trend-setting album, *Kutonga Kwaro*, dovetailed with the greatest political development since the country's independence, the resignation of Robert Mugabe (Chikowore 2017).

At the announcement of the album's title several weeks before its official release, some social media users extended the name to *Kutonga Kwaro Garwe* in a connotative reference to the much-touted president-designate, Emmerson Mnangagwa. In this section, we focus on the title song and outline the social construction around the song at the time of release and later during the military-assisted transition in November 2017. Nyavaya (2018) notes that the hit song "Kutonga Kwaro" "served as a non-stop theme song for President Emmerson Mnangagwa during his 'interim' leadership and, ultimately, the campaign trail." The song became the soundtrack to Robert Mugabe's demise and Emmerson Mnangagwa's elevation. As Muzari (2017) writes in the *Herald*,

Every revolution is oiled with music that resonates with the winds of change. Jah Prayzah's album *Kutonga Kwaro*, released 43 days ago, has dovetailed with the greatest political development since the country's independence – the resignation of Robert Mugabe. When the album's title was announced a few weeks before its release, some social media users extended the name to "*Kutonga Kwaro Garwe*" [*Garwe* or *Ngwena* (crocodile) is Mnangagwa's moniker] in connotative reference to now-President-designate Emmerson Mnangagwa.

By stating that the song resonated with the winds of change and dovetailed with the greatest political development, Muzari (2017) naturalises a relationship of determination between the music and transition events. This obscures the album's performative agency in intervening and reconstituting those developments. Notably, social media users extended the album title in referencing Mnangagwa, performing an early discursive positioning of him as the figure represented by the slogan *kutonga kwaro*. This pre-empted and participated in the coup's trajectory by prefiguring Mnangagwa within the liberation narrative framed by the music. This characterisation by a state-controlled newspaper provides insights into how ZANU-PF co-opted the songs and their potent political currency at the time. During the 2017 coup, Jah Prayzah's music was played on state media, particularly on the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), controlled by the government. This led to speculation that his music was being used to influence public opinion and support for the coup (Chikowore 2017). However, avoiding the risks of overstating the music's relationship to real world events and presenting a simplistic reflection theory is important. While the songs engaged with transition topics, their role was complex, with room for multiple meanings and appropriations. Performativity theory highlights how the album did not merely describe Mnangagwa's rise but actively constructed his ascendancy as a natural and heroic progression from Mugabe's regime. The title track functioned as a performative cultural artefact, symbolically positioning Mnangagwa as the embodiment of national renewal. The song's repetitive, anthemic qualities served as a rallying point for collective

identity, fostering an emotional connection among a populace yearning for change. This created a shared narrative of hope and rejuvenation, effectively legitimising the new political order.

The social construction surrounding the album *Kutonga Kwaro* underscores the symbiotic relationship between cultural production and political transformation. Its appropriation by Mnangagwa's supporters and state-controlled media highlights how cultural artefacts can be co-opted to consolidate power. However, this phenomenon also reveals the complexities of artistic agency. Jah Prayzah's lyrics allowed for multiple interpretations, enabling the music to resonate across different audiences. While the album was hailed as an anthem of change, its reception depended on its alignment with state-endorsed narratives and public expectations of political renewal. Thus, *Kutonga Kwaro* exemplifies how music operates as a performative medium that intertwines with political discourse. The album became a cultural agent of change by participating in the broader symbolic ecosystem surrounding Mnangagwa's rise, shaping public perceptions and reinforcing narratives of liberation, continuity, and hope during a pivotal moment in Zimbabwe's history.

Prophecy or Coincidence: The Paradox

The album *Kutonga Kwaro* is littered with specific insights into the events of November 2017. One such song is "Masoja," which, in a way, foretells a military coup. The song is a tribute to the Zimbabwean soldiers who had served their country with bravery and dedication. *Masoja* is a Shona word that means "soldiers." The song's overall celebratory tone, praising the army, is instructive. Below, we analyse the key messages in the song:

- *Amai ndawona mudungwe wemagamba vachifora vakananga mugomo*
(“Mother, I saw a line of soldiers marching towards the mountain”)
This mirrors the movement of soldiers from the barracks marching towards the capital city (the mountain). On 15 November 2017, “soldiers took control of the headquarters of the state broadcaster ZBC and blocked access to government offices ... putting Mugabe under house arrest ...” (Al Jazeera 2017). The soldiers took over key infrastructure in a coordinated effort that was portrayed as a police exercise to target the “criminals around the president” (BBC 2017).
- *Yangova yo yo yon ema soldier [x2], zvikanzi simudza tienda iwe soja, yangova yoyo nema soja [x3]*
(“We are singing and celebrating with the soldiers [x2], rise to go, soldier, we are now singing and celebrating with the soldiers [x3]”)
This alludes to the unique nature of the coup in Zimbabwe, where soldiers did not impose crackdowns but interacted with the public on the streets. As a CNN report highlighted, “Tens of thousands of anti-Mugabe demonstrators took to the streets, singing, dancing, and taking selfies with soldiers as military helicopters circled overhead. Until Wednesday's army takeover, even minor anti-government protests

in Zimbabwe had been met with tear gas, rubber bullets, and batons. The key difference this time was that the aims of the demonstrators and the military—the removal of Mugabe—were aligned” (Mackintosh 2017).

Others argue that the song celebrates the sacrifices of Zimbabwean soldiers who have served in various conflicts and peacekeeping missions worldwide. However, in the aftermath of November 2017, it is difficult to dismiss this song’s deeper meaning and prophetic-like nature. The central role played by the Zimbabwe Defence Forces in the coup and the celebration on the streets between people and soldiers solidifies how the message in “Masoja” can be viewed as foretelling Zimbabwe’s political future.

Amid the myriad social discourses surrounding the album *Kutonga Kwaro*, one pertinent question stands out: Was *Kutonga Kwaro* merely an album or a prescient view of the role of the military in the political future of Emmerson Mnangagwa? Mazara (2017) concluded “and that time in September when Jah Prayzah’s album was linked to him—even before people heard the lyrics—the intention was not sincere, but it has turned out to be the greatest prophecy of our time.” The idea that Jah Prayzah’s music serves a prophetic purpose is strengthened by analysing the lyrics of “Kutonga Kwaro.” As Mbiriyamveka (2021) describes, the lyrics seemed direct and targeted, almost like a call to action during a pivotal historical moment. The song’s slogans and phrases, such as “*kutonga kwaro*” and calls to “open the door for change,” resonated powerfully with public frustrations and demands during protests against Mugabe. This suggestive language took on renewed significance in light of unfolding political developments.

Interestingly, the track managed to transcend its origins as a song representing military intervention through unofficial public appropriation. It became anthemic for the street marches organised to demand a leadership transition. This speaks to the music’s ability to capture the spirit of dissent and encapsulate aspirational narratives in a way that galvanises collective popular participation. The joyous public singing of these lyrics in celebrating Mugabe’s exit also reconstructs the coup’s meaning (Mazara 2017). Rather than a disruption, it frames the military actions as fulfilling the directives outlined in Jah Prayzah’s music. This effectively legitimises the questionable means by which power changed hands. The prophecy narrative is strengthened by the empowerment of the adoption and civic instrumentalisation of the album’s discourse. It also reveals the performative capacity of music to reconstitute understandings of political events through participation (Chikowore 2017).

The notion of prophecy, as embodied in the album *Kutonga Kwaro*, highlights the symbolic weight of Jah Prayzah’s music during Zimbabwe’s 2017 political transition. Performativity theory reveals how the ambiguity in tracks like “Masoja” allowed the music to engage with socio-political dynamics in ways that transcended intentionality. The song’s imagery of soldiers moving towards a mountain resonated powerfully with events surrounding the military’s intervention during Mugabe’s removal. This overlap between the album’s themes and real world developments gave *Kutonga Kwaro* an

almost prescient quality, fostering public perceptions of the music as prophetic. Through post-coup discourse analysis, the album's reception became a site of meaning-making, as audiences interpreted "Masoja" and related tracks in ways that aligned with their aspirations for political change. Supporters of the coup appropriated these songs to frame the military's actions as divinely guided and inevitable, casting Mnangagwa's rise as a fulfilment of the liberation struggle's promises. The music's polysemic nature enabled this co-option, as its themes of valour, renewal, and governance could align with varied narratives. However, framing the music as prophecy risks oversimplifying its role. Rather than being an unintentional forecast, *Kutonga Kwaro* actively constructed political realities by engaging with cultural tropes of power and authority. Its celebratory tone and evocative imagery amplified public sentiment, creating an emotional and symbolic framework through which Zimbabweans understood the political upheaval. This duality underscores the nuanced relationship between art and politics, where music serves as a mirror of societal aspirations and a catalyst for collective action.

Power Pendulum Swings: From the Ignominy of Attack to the Accolades of Coronation

There is a permanently paradoxical turn of events in the reception and popularisation of the chart-topping track, "Kutonga Kwaro." The song was used as an excuse for political power contestations. Jah Prayzah was assaulted by the then pro-Mugabe ZANU-PF youths at the Glen Forest cemetery on 31 October 2017, at the burial of the artist's former head of security, Chrispen Nyemba (Ndlovhu 2017). In a phenomenal drama of extravagant theatricality, the same song catapulted Jah Prayzah to great fame, resonating with the euphoric celebrations of Zimbabwe's new dispensation under Emmerson Mnangagwa. Ironically, the same song earned Jah Prayzah praise. Speaking on the explosion of fame after the coup, his manager noted, "Good music is open to varying interpretations. Music fans see different things in the same song. It is up to the people to interpret our music as they see fit. We have, of course, been pleasantly surprised and delighted that Zimbabweans have found our music relevant to changes taking place in our country" (Mashava 2017). The manager's comments after the coup reveal an important perspective on Jah Prayzah's music and its relationship to politics. By stating that good music is open to varying interpretations and that it's up to people to interpret it as they want, he acknowledges the polysemic nature of artistic works. This counters simplistic notions of one-to-one causality or reflection between music and events. Music can convey multiple meanings concurrently, depending on the ideological lenses through which it is received (Garratt 2018). Different listeners can derive different signifiers from the same song, as demonstrated by protesters and regime supporters finding resonance in Jah Prayzah's material.

Jah Prayzah's manager expressed surprise that the music had taken on special significance during Zimbabwe's transition period but stopped short of directly ascribing purpose or prophecy. This recognises the contingency of art's interaction with political conjunctures; meanings are contextual and unpredictably appropriated by diverse

actors. We argue that it is plausible that Mugabe’s resignation unfolded alongside Jah Prayzah’s rising soundtrack status. However, overstating music’s causality risks inflating its power while ignoring other structural factors. A more nuanced view treats culture and politics as mutually shaped rather than deterministically mapped. Political players certainly leverage some lyrical interpretations to validate power moves, as seen in coup supporters adopting *kutonga kwaro* as a slogan. However, meanings cannot be rigidly fixed or controlled even by artists, leaving room for resistance to impose frameworks. By acknowledging contingency and polyvocality, the manager’s perspective offers prudent caution against reductive analysis. It recognises that culture’s complexity extends beyond overt messages to the open-ended nature of symbolic production and reception during transitional moments thick with contestation. It is also not far-fetched to argue that Mugabe’s downfall was played out to the soundtrack of Jah Prayzah’s music. The meaning and popularity of music across political epochs are often context-dependent, with political actors appropriating or rejecting specific lyrical meanings.

Chikowore (2017) further notes that in “‘Ndini Ndamubata’ – which translates literally to ‘I have caught him ...’ – Jah Prayzah could appear, in hindsight, to be asking Zimbabweans if they are happy that Mugabe had been forced to vacate the presidency.” Just weeks before Mugabe was finally ousted, the phrasing almost portentously refers to the culmination of events beginning to unfurl but not yet visible. The question posed in the lyrics—“Are you happy?”—takes on renewed poignancy when viewed against the backdrop of Mugabe’s resignation being forced upon him. From this perspective, the song could be interpreted as subtly anticipating and encouraging the outcome whereby Mugabe was politically outmanoeuvred and removed from power. Much like other tracks narrating Mnangagwa’s ascendancy, “Ndini Ndamubata” retroactively appeared to almost prophecy future developments in its coded idiomatic language and rhetoric of change.

The shifting reception of the album *Kutonga Kwaro* highlights the fluid dynamics of cultural interpretation in politically charged contexts. Initially criticised and linked to factional conflicts within ZANU-PF, the album became a celebrated anthem for Mnangagwa’s new dispensation. Performativity theory elucidates this transformation, showing how the music’s meaning evolved as political power shifted. When Jah Prayzah faced attacks from Mugabe loyalists, the song “Kutonga Kwaro” symbolised dissent against the old regime. After the coup, however, the same songs were co-opted to legitimise Mnangagwa’s leadership, reflecting the mutable nature of cultural artifacts in response to power realignments. This paradox illustrates how music becomes a contested space for meaning-making in transitional societies. The pendulum swing from rejection to acclaim demonstrates the polyvocality of both the album and the song “Kutonga Kwaro,” as its lyrics and themes allow for diverse interpretations. While the artist’s manager emphasised the open-ended nature of good music, this perspective underscores the risks artists face when their work is appropriated to serve conflicting political agendas. The state and its supporters’ celebratory embrace of *Kutonga Kwaro*

reveals the instrumentalisation of culture for political consolidation. By framing Mnangagwa's rise as a natural and heroic development, the music helped normalise the coup and rally public support. Yet, this association also limited the music's subversive potential, aligning it with state narratives. The transformation of *Kutonga Kwaro* from a divisive artifact to a unifying anthem encapsulates the dynamic interplay between cultural production, political power, and public sentiment in Zimbabwe's volatile political landscape.

The Backlash and Controversy Surrounding Jah Prayzah Post-November 2017

Dube (2021) notes that after the coup, Jah Prayzah fell victim to the volatile political climate, with some music fans threatening to mute his voice owing to his association with the country's military. Various critics have been at the forefront of campaigns to mute Jah Prayzah because of his perceived allegiance to the ruling ZANU-PF party. Below are some of the voices leading the backlash against the singer:

Jah Prayzah is said to be appealing to Zimbabwean people to vote for him so that he wins this award and subsequently gets a bigger head than he already has. But this is a guy who is silent about the evils of this Zanu-PF government. Not only that, he sings at their jamborees, where they celebrate their ill-gotten power with no sense of self-awareness at all. He was also silent during the #ZimbabweanLivesMatter campaign. He is not a man of the people. (Ncube 2020)

United Kingdom-based fans have threatened to block Jah Prayzah from performing in the European country on his upcoming tour in April owing to his close links with the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF), which stands accused of brutally attacking and shooting civilians. (Bruce 2019)

Jah Prayzah's previous release, *Kutonga Kwaro*, was then interpreted as Mnangagwa's anthem and constantly played at his functions accompanied by a trademark dance, which his camp calls the presidential shuffle. The singer once invited Mnangagwa to his album launch while he was still vice president. Opposition political figures such as Tendai Biti have come out publicly, hitting out at Jah Prayzah for praise-singing Zanu-PF, which—according to them—has ruined the country's fortunes. (Masakadza 2018)

Jah Prayzah had long struggled with accusations of being too close to the ruling ZANU-PF party following Zimbabwe's political transition (Ncube 2017). But matters came to a head in early 2020 amid growing public frustration at the state of the country. Critics noted his silence on rampant rights abuses and failure to use his platform to support civic campaigns like #ZimbabweanLivesMatter (Ncube 2020). Critics argued that Jah Prayzah's silence on human rights abuses and economic hardships reflected a lack of independence and moral leadership. This controversy underscores the fragile boundary between cultural expression and political co-option. By engaging in state-endorsed events and fostering ties with the military, Jah Prayzah's public image became entwined with the ruling party's legitimacy, alienating sections of his audience who viewed him as a propagandist.

Opposition leader Biti soon echoed such criticisms, condemning the artist's "praise-singing" of the party many blamed for Zimbabwe's downfall. Biti felt Jah Prayzah glossed over real suffering by failing to hold the establishment to account. His interpretation as Mnangagwa's "anthem singer" since the coup dealt further blows to perceptions of his independence. Matters escalated when fans in the United Kingdom threatened to block Jah Prayzah's European tour owing to the military's role in violent crackdowns (Brown 2019). As the army was an institution to which he remained closely linked, this raised questions about whether he genuinely defended citizens' basic rights. The backlash revealed how close identification with a repressive state can undermine credibility on the global stage. By failing to use his influence critically, Jah Prayzah seemed to be propagandising for the ruling elite rather than advancing true socio-political change, thereby compromising his art and reputation as the "voice of the people" (Kudita 2020). This controversy marked a low point for the singer's standing and autonomy in the eyes of activists and opposition members.

The backlash against Jah Prayzah after the 2017 coup highlights the precarious position of artists in politically polarised environments. While "Kutonga Kwaro" initially garnered acclaim for aligning with public euphoria surrounding Mugabe's removal, its association with ZANU-PF and the military led to accusations of collaboration with repressive state structures. Post-coup discourse analysis reveals how the same music that galvanised hope for change became a symbol of disillusionment for many Zimbabweans as Mnangagwa's rule failed to deliver promised reforms. This backlash reveals the risks inherent in the performative nature of music within politically charged contexts. Although the album *Kutonga Kwaro* originally promoted stories of renewal, its close alignment with government narratives limited its ability to bring about real change. The controversy also illustrates artists' challenges in maintaining autonomy while navigating public expectations and political pressures. Jah Prayzah's experience underscores the dual-edged nature of cultural production in transitional societies, where music can simultaneously inspire hope and spark division, reflecting the complexities of art's entanglement with power and resistance.

Conclusion

In examining the multivalent socio-political dynamics of both the album (*Kutonga Kwaro*) and song ("Kutonga Kwaro"), this article shows that music not only reflects societal tensions but also actively reshapes power dynamics and public discourse during transformative periods. This article aimed to provide a nuanced analysis of the complex intersections between contemporary music and shifting political climates, using Jah Prayzah's seminal album *Kutonga Kwaro* as a case study. It explored how the album and its signature title track became deeply intertwined with Zimbabwe's turbulent transition from Mugabe to Mnangagwa's rule in late 2017. Through lenses such as performativity theory, post-coup discourse analysis, and critiques of propagation versus socio-political commentary, the discussion has pieced together the multifaceted ways in which the "Kutonga Kwaro" song and album captured and actively moulded

understandings of these pivotal events. From prefiguring Mnangagwa's rise to enacting collective unity through protest performances, Jah Prayzah's work substantively reconstituted transition narratives. However, the analysis has also cautioned against overstating art's causal powers or uniqueness in shaping political change.

Jah Prayzah's music, while celebrated and contested, illustrates the delicate balance between cultural autonomy and political co-option, offering a profound case study of how art can simultaneously unite and polarise within the framework of nation-building. Acknowledging polyvocality and contingency in cultural production and reception contexts of flux and contestation, it recognises culture and structure as mutually formative rather than deterministically mapped. By looking at the backlash Jah Prayzah later faced for his close ties to the ruling party, the discussion tracks the fine line artists walk between the voices of dissent and regime propagandists. It highlights the capacity and risks of cultural works wielding outsized symbolic influence during unrest. Ultimately, this examination has aimed to further scholarly appreciation for the nuanced, multivalent dynamics through which artistic expression and societal transitions dynamically intertwine in the African context. Jah Prayzah's music serves as a powerful bridge between Zimbabwean cultural identity and global narratives of resistance and transformation. By blending traditional Shona sounds with contemporary Afropop influences, his music resonates far beyond Zimbabwe's borders, embodying the universal struggles of societies grappling with political upheaval and social change. His songs reflect the complexities of power, governance, and collective aspirations, offering a poignant exploration of art's ability to influence political consciousness and inspire societal action. In this way, Jah Prayzah's work transcends entertainment, becoming a global symbol of how music intersects with politics.

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