

Social Dynamics and Identity Formation in *Sungura* Music: An Ethnographic Study of Alick Macheso's Audience Engagement

Vimbai Chamisa
University of South Africa, ZAF

Abstract

This study focuses on the social dynamics and identity formation within Alick Macheso's audiences using an ethnographic approach to examine how and why these audiences interact with *sungura* music in diverse contexts. By analysing live performances, lyrical themes, and fan engagements—both online and offline—the research seeks to understand how *sungura* music serves as a cultural and social medium that shapes collective and individual identities. Christopher Small's (1998) concept of 'musicking', is employed in this study to examine how interactions between Macheso's audiences and his *sungura* reflect the social identities and socio-economic contexts of the audience. The study posits that the different backgrounds of his audiences and the socio-economic environments in which they live determine the extent of their involvement with this style of music. I argue in this article that the *sungura* style serves as a space in which its audiences actively enact and express their social identity. As they imagine independence, advancement, and self-improvement, the audiences' engagement with Macheso's *sungura* provides them the confidence and fortitude to 'hustle' for a better existence despite the difficulties they face in their daily lives both inside and outside of Zimbabwe's borders.

Introduction

Sungura music, a dominant popular music style in Zimbabwean, has long served as a vehicle for social commentary, identity expression, and communal belonging (Perman, 2012; Chamisa, 2023). Among its leading performers, Alick Macheso stands out as one of Zimbabwe's most celebrated and influential musicians, widely regarded as the 'King of *Sungura*'. Born in Shamva District in 1968, Macheso rose to prominence in the 1990s as the frontman of Orchestra Mberikwazvo, a band he founded after stints with Khiama Boys and other groups. His exceptional bass guitar playing, dynamic performances, and socially conscious lyrics have earned him a loyal and diverse following across Zimbabwe and its diaspora communities. Macheso's music transcends mere entertainment, becoming a sonic medium through which audiences negotiate their social identities, resilience, and aspirations amid shifting socio-economic realities.

The genre of *sungura* itself, characterised by its fast-paced guitar interplay and vibrant rhythmic structures, emerged in the 1980s, drawing influence from East and Central African Soukous and Rumba traditions. Its appeal lies in its capacity to reflect the everyday social and economic struggles of ordinary Zimbabweans. As Zimbabwe's economy has faced persistent instability, hyperinflation, and high unemployment since the late 1990s, many citizens have increasingly resorted to informal economic activities, colloquially termed *kukiya-kiya* or *kungwavha-ngwavha* (to hustle). By hustling, I mean the 'multidimensional practice wrought by the crises [in Zimbabwe] and used by [the] unemployed' to deal with and manage uncertainties (Mate, 2021: 355). In such circumstances, 'the idea is that one "secures" a living in a battle with circumstance, and that survival is a matter of persistence and outright force' (Jones, 2010: 290). Hustling, thus, as Mate describes it, 'entails making-do, improvisation to opportunistically create livelihoods and to earn money... [and] it points to collective insecurity due to chronic uncertainty' (Mate, 2021: 356).

In this context, *sungura* music has served as both a cultural archive and a participatory platform, narrating these struggles while offering moral guidance and resilience narratives. Macheso's music, in particular, embodies this role, speaking directly to these lived experiences and offering a musical space where fans enact and reimagine their identities and socio-economic agency.

Following Kyker's (2013: 263) assertion that 'attention to listening and reception can greatly enhance our understanding of the social meanings of musical sound', this study explores the social dynamics and identity formation within Macheso's audience, using an ethnographic approach to examine how and why fans interact with his music in diverse contexts. This research seeks to understand how *sungura* music serves as a cultural toolkit (Swidler, 1986) for shaping identities and fostering community cohesion, often through acts of affective play and symbolic resistance. By analysing live performances, lyrical themes, and fan engagements (both online and offline), the research seeks to understand how *sungura* music serves as a cultural and social medium that shapes collective and individual identities. Additionally, the study interrogates how Macheso's persona, lyrical narratives, and performance strategies contribute to a shared sense of belonging among his followers.

To do this I use Christopher Small's concept of musicking which explains the sonic and social relationships that are established between the participants by the performance. By participants

Small refers to composers, performers and audiences. According to the theory of musicking, audiences create music together with 'main' performers, exploring and celebrating the relationships that constitute their social identity through listening and various other forms of participation such as singing, clapping and dancing. In his study of the music of Zimbabwe and Peru, Turino (2008: 28) similarly describes audience participatory engagement as 'actively contributing to the sound and motion of a musical event through dancing, singing, clapping — when each of these activities is considered integral part to the performance'.

These various forms of musicking allow audiences to communicate information about themselves and also offer them the opportunity to choose or imagine who they want to be in relation to others (Small, 1998: 134). Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998: 37) thus assert that being part of an audience is actually 'intimately bound up with the construction of a person'. Pitts and Price (2020) concur in their work that audience members value musical participation because it creates opportunity for them to express their identities in relation to others. This study builds on the concept of musicking by situating it within the field of audience and fan studies, which examines how media texts are actively interpreted and used by communities to construct identity (Bennett, 2012; Baym, 2012). Following Beattie's (2025) work on music and national identity, this paper argues that Macheso's *sungura* functions as a discursive site where Zimbabwean identity is not merely reflected but actively constructed and performed. Beattie's finding that artists can 'flag the nation' through paratextual details and lyrical content provides a crucial framework for understanding how Macheso's music, through its references to local places, practices, and the Shona language, actively builds a sense of shared Zimbabwean experience for his audience.

As such Turino (2008: 33) observes in the context of Zimbabwean music that the success of a performance will be judged by the degree and intensity of participation by audiences. Following these ideas, I identify and examine the nature of social relationships established among Macheso's audiences during their engagement with his music and how they find the meaning of the music through these relationships. As such this study offers insights into the intersection of music, social interaction, and identity politics in contemporary Zimbabwe. By focusing on Macheso's audience engagement, the study contributes to broader discussions on the role of popular music in shaping social identities and fostering community cohesion.

Macheso's Audience Identities

Writing about popular music audiences, Bennett (2012) explains how certain socio-historical, political and cultural circumstances that define audiences inform their personal and communal experiences of the music. As such, Macheso's audience identities that I interacted with in this study provided relevant background to my understanding of the processes that shape particular musical experiences, meanings and value judgements that they acquire from their engagement with *sungura* music.

Understanding these identities also requires situating them within the broader Zimbabwean economic and social context. Since the late 1990s, the country's economic structure has undergone severe crises characterised by hyperinflation, shrinking formal employment, and

a near-collapse of state services. In response, Zimbabweans have increasingly embraced informal economic practices, a culture commonly referred to as hustling.

Macheso's music resonates strongly with this hustling economy because it addresses both the material struggles and moral dilemmas faced by those navigating such uncertain livelihoods. His lyrical narratives valorise resilience and hard work while critiquing unethical or harmful survival strategies such as corruption and ritual wealth-seeking. As such, his audiences find in *sungura* not just entertainment but a repository of cultural knowledge, hope, and collective identity. In this section, I explore who Macheso's audiences are in terms of their identities in relation to their lived socio-economic and political circumstances. These identities not only lay a background that informs how these audiences engage with Macheso's but also show how his *sungura* continues to inform certain social identity formations in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

This study established that age and social class are important to understand Macheso's audience identities. I noted that the age group that constitutes Macheso's audiences and fans generally ranges from around the mid-twenties onwards (see Appendix A). This is unlike other Zimbabwean popular music styles that similarly emerged after colonial independence in the country such as Zimdancehall and Urban grooves whose performance and listenership is dominated by people as young as teens and thus referred to as urban youth styles (Kufakurinani and Mwatwara, 2017; Manase, 2009). The scarcity of younger people who are interested in *sungura* led me to further explore how *sungura* appeals more to listeners at a certain age of their lifetime.

While most of Macheso's audiences reconnect the musician and his music to their youth it was apparent that they only started to pay particular attention to the music and its meaning in their lives at a later age. One of my respondents Kurai¹ describes himself as a staunch Macheso fan. Kurai recalls Macheso in 1998 when he was still a teenage boy:

Initially, I listened to the music because it was the in-thing around 1998...I loved Macheso because everyone liked him, he was just good, I think. He looked fancy to me, if you have seen his video on *Sarah*—I was young then. But my appreciation of him also went beyond that to the meaning of the music later. (Kurai, Interview with author, 2020)

For Kurai, Macheso's messages could not meaningfully appeal to him when he was at primary and secondary school. Probed further how his choice to listen more closely on Macheso's message grew, Kurai said:

Kana usati wavaziva chinonzi life music yaMacheso haigoni kukuvaraidza. Macheso anomaker sense kana une ndima yawakatarisana nayo...paunenge wakarongedza bag so uchiti ndichamboenda mumasango, urimo munonzi mumasango imomo Macheso ndoopano maker sense

(When one has not gone through certain phases of life Macheso's music may not interest them. Macheso makes sense when you have a portion of the field that you have to work

¹ All of my respondents have been given pseudonyms.

and finish...imagine, having packed your bag and left home for work. It is when you are away from home, working and expected to yield something that Macheso makes sense.) (Interview with author, 2020).

From my conversations with Kurai I noted that his circumstances as a graduate in Zimbabwe anticipating financial stability and the need to provide for his young family informed his involvement with Macheso's *sungura*. I also interacted with Tendai who, as Macheso's fan, regarded herself as a promoter of this musician. Tendai also explained her initial experiences with Macheso when she was in her early twenties:

I came to know Macheso's music ndichangoroorwa ndichigara nemurume wangu Chitungwiza uko. Murume wangu ndiye aifarira Macheso zvakanyanya and we would go to attend his shows together. And so, one of the days we attended his show muChitungwiza...Ndakangonakidzwa nemapfekero ake aanga akaita ari funny so. Iyewo aigara muChitungwiza and we would meet him in the neighbourhood. But to be honest ndakazotanga kunyatsodzamirwa nemusic yaMacheso gore randasiyana nemurume wangu, 2004. It will never be easy. Dai varume vachimboteerera song yaMacheso inonzi 'Murume' [Husband].

(I came to know Macheso's music when I got married to my husband, we were staying in Chitungwiza. My husband loved Macheso and so we would attend his shows together. And so, one of the days we attended his show in Chitungwiza...I got attracted to his funny way of dressing then. Macheso was staying in Chitungwiza also and we would meet him in the neighbourhood. But to be honest the music started to be deeply meaningful to me the year when I divorced my husband, in 2004. It will never be easy. I wish that men would listen to Macheso's song called 'Murume' (Husband). (Interview with author, 2019)

As such, for Tendai the challenges associated with single motherhood that she experienced determined her engagement with Macheso's music. Tendai's experience highlights the distinctly gendered dimensions of 'hustling' and musical engagement. As a single mother, her economic struggles are intertwined with societal expectations of caregiving. Her connection to Macheso's song 'Murume' suggests a search for moral guidance and solidarity in the face of these gendered challenges. This aligns with the work of Chitando and Mapuranga (2016), who argue that music in Zimbabwe often serves as a key site for women to negotiate and contest their social roles. While a full intersectional analysis (see Crenshaw, 1989) is beyond the scope of this paper, Tendai's case indicates that female fans may engage with *sungura* not only for its themes of general resilience but also for its commentary on familial relationships, marital strife, and the particular burdens of womanhood in a precarious economy. Further research could productively explore this gendered listening experience in greater depth.

Simbarashe, also shared how he came to value Macheso's music:

Taingomunzwawo Macheso tichikura nemukurumbira wake wekugona but ndakazotanga kunakirwa nemusic yake gore randaenda kunoshava nevamwe. Nziyo yake inonzi 'Baba', kana muchiiziva inondifungisa nguva yandaichera gold paGweshe kuMhondoro.

(We would hear about Macheso's popularity as we were growing up but I started to enjoy his music the year when I went to look for work with others. His song entitled 'Baba' [Father] if you know it reminds me of the time when we were engaged in gold panning at Gweshe in Mhondoro.) (Interview with author, 2020)

Other respondents, like Upenyu, similarly associated their first meaningful experiences with Macheso's music with the onset of adult economic pressures, such as his work as an artisanal miner in Shurugwi. He commented that '*ndidzo nziyo dzekumakomba idzi!*' (These are songs that we use when we are digging the mines!) (Interview with author, 2020).

It is evident from these quoted responses that while these particular audience members had known Macheso earlier in their lives, they found their attraction to *sungura* deepening when they had to become financially independent, assuming socio-economic responsibilities within their families. Such an attraction is based on the message of the music which, according to my respondents, and as I explore in the section that follows, resonates more with certain socio-economic circumstances.

An analysis of the circumstances in which Macheso's audiences came to value his music reveals that these audiences are identified with conditions defined by insecurity and uncertainty about the future. Kurai, for instance, faced with certain responsibilities after university, could not find employment but like a hunter, he had to go '*mumasango*' (in the forest) and present himself for work in order to secure a livelihood. On the other hand, for Tendai, the responsibility of raising her children single handed meant that she had to re-adjust her position socially and economically within her family. Similarly, Simbarashe and Upenyu with limited educational qualifications and professional skills as further shown in their profiles below, end up engaging in *chikorokoza* (artisanal mining) to try their luck. The distinct demographic of Macheso's audience, older than those of Zimdancehall or Urban Grooves, suggests that *sungura* functions as what Beattie (2025) might term a 'national pseudo-genre'. While Zimdancehall is often associated with the struggles and identity formation of urban youth (Kufakurinani and Mwatwara, 2017), *sungura* has become a genre defined by and for those grappling with the socioeconomic responsibilities of adulthood. This distinction highlights how different musical styles within Zimbabwe serve as distinct cultural spaces for negotiating specific, life-stage-oriented identities. These explanations surrounding Macheso's audience members, show that their identity as *sungura* fans is tied to the situation that they found themselves in, that of being able to 'hustle'.

The 'hustling identity' is apparent across the diverse profiles of my respondents (see Appendix A for full details). For instance, Tendai (F, 30-40, music promoter) is a single mother who built a business after divorce. Tapiwa (M, 40-50, university lecturer) overcame a difficult rural childhood through education. Kurai (M, 30-40, graduate based in South Africa) represents the diasporic hustler seeking greener pastures. This common thread of overcoming adversity through ingenuity and hard work unites them as an audience.

What apparently unifies Macheso's distinct audience members is that they share a common history associated with some form of crisis and social insecurity at a certain point in their lives. The economic goals and constraints which these people encountered at some point in their social history are acting here as particularly important determiners of their interest in Macheso's style. As Macheso addresses problems such as lack of access to basic needs in his songs such as '*Hupenyu hwemunhu*' from the album *Vapupuri pupurai* (2005), problems which have become common among both the middle-class, working class and the lower class in Zimbabwe's '*kukiya-kiya* economy' (Jones, 2010: 285), his audiences present a mixture of social groups. These various groups seek to contest and re-shape their socio-economic status. The fact that *sungura* is a 'mixed bag' of identities accounts for the rising popularity of *sungura* in postcolonial Zimbabwe especially when compared to other styles such as Zimdancehall.

What is also similar between Macheso's audiences is their conscious desire to escape and survive the crises. Thus, Macheso's audience identities are organised around their desire and effort to improve their social statuses against certain undesirable circumstances they are in or have been exposed to. It is against this background that some of Macheso's audiences that I interacted with associate Macheso's music with their particular 'hustling' experiences:

Julius, for example, said the following:

This song 'Baba' (Father), inondifungisa nguva yandaichera gold paGweshe kuMhondoro. Ipapo pfungwa dzekujamba border to South Africa dzanga dzisati dzavepo

(This song reminds me of the days when I was involved in gold panning at Gweshe in Mhondoro. I had not thought then of crossing the border illegally to South Africa. (Interview with author, 2020)

In relation to the song '*Madhuve*' on *Ndezvashe* (2007), Kurai and Simbarashe expressed the following, respectively:

Kurai:

I remember 2008 first time ever working on a farm in Limpopo running away from Zimbabwe's hard life, this song (*Madhuve*) was at its peak, *ichirohwa mupurazi* (played at a farm), there were a lot of qualified teachers and principals working on that farm. (Interview with author, 2020)

Simbarashe:

This track has so many memories! *Ndiyo zvekare nguva yemangoda kuChiyadzwa. Magweja achiimba kuti 'kuenda kuJoni muchisiya ngoda muZimbabwe'*

(That's the time when people were mining diamonds in Chiyanzwa. Artisanal miners were singing the lyrics which says 'going to Johannesburg leaving diamonds in Zimbabwe') (Interview with author, 2020)

Indeed, *chikorokoza* (artisanal mining), *chihwindi* (touting), *chicrossborder* (cross-border trading), working in farms and various other forms of hustling have become alternative means for survival for both the educated and the uneducated, professionals and non-professionals, the formally employed and the non-formal ones.

The songs '*Baba*' and '*Madhuve*' referred to by Macheso's audiences above articulate the idea of resilience under difficult circumstances and as such can easily appeal to hustlers as a source of courage and hope to escape the seemingly inescapable circumstances. There is a close relationship between the condition of being in crisis and the likelihood to engage in immoral and or illegal behaviour such as mugging and prostitution (Mate, 2021; Jones, 2010), Macheso discourages immoral ways of earning money such as *kuromba* (acquiring riches through money rituals which involves use of goblins), *humbavha* (stealing) and corruption in songs such as '*Pfuma yacho*' on *Dzinosvitsa kure* (2018). Macheso's message here resonates with Beattie's (2025) findings on how a band's paratextual identity where the band members' perceived genuineness and connection to their roots, is central to their appeal. For Macheso's fans, his music promotes *hunhu* (good character), constructing a mythologised ideal of ethical resilience that is central to their identity as Zimbabweans navigating a precarious economy.

While Perman (2012: 396) describes *sungura* audiences that he interacted with 'as a group, which has not yet gained consciousness of its strength, its possibilities, of how it is to develop', through engaging in various activities within their class levels they are aware of the need to improve and consequently escape the socio-economic challenges in Zimbabwe that Perman describes as 'inescapable'. Using *sungura* as a toolbox, they acquire strength to work hard in an effort to escape these challenges. As such Macheso's audiences are not necessarily people without any plan, 'who continue to languish in deplorable poverty' as Muwati et al. (2013: 113) suggest but those who have realised their potential to liberate themselves from various forms of poverty. Hence, in his latest single '*Zuro ndizuro*' (2020) Macheso's audiences sing together with the band '*naMacheso tinovika*' (with Macheso we will make it). Through engaging in the various activities, they strive to re-define their identities so as to realise their worth.

Participatory Performance in Macheso's Live Shows

The 'hustling' identities explored in the previous section are not merely passive; they are actively performed and solidified through collective ritual. This performance of identity is most vividly observed in the participatory culture of Macheso's live shows, where the theoretical concept of 'musicking' becomes a tangible reality. Explaining his concept of 'musicking', Small (1998: 9) argues that 'the value of music lies not in musical works but in taking part in performance, in social action'. I observed in Macheso's live shows that one of the greatest moments for his audiences is when they are performing together with the band. Indeed, Macheso has various ways of engaging his audiences to participate in performance during live shows, which I refer to as participatory performance.

Turino (2008: 28) explains participatory performance as 'a special type of artistic practice in which there are no artistic-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants performing different roles, and the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in

some performance role'. In this section, I examine how, through participatory performance during Macheso's live shows, Macheso's audiences are enabled to express their social identities. I argue that one of the reasons that attracts them to *sungura* is that the style is a space where they enact and shape their identities. As Schechner (2003) explains, identity depends on performance and also on various observable presentations of self to others in certain social contexts.

During live performances, Macheso's audiences actively participate through singing along, dancing, clapping as well as through screaming and whistling to confirm certain ideas. Most of Macheso's song lyrics have been composed in first person narrative such that when the audiences sing along each is enabled to experience the issues that the musician articulates from a personal perspective. Macheso also usually structures his songs in such a way that in the sections where there is no singing, there is serious guitar playing accompanied by thorough dancing from both the band and the audience. In the dancing sections, Jonas Kasamba, Macheso's chanter often invites the audiences to execute their various dance moves such as *Zora butter* (Smear butter on bread) and *Kochekera* ('Hook') saying '*munhu wese kochekera*' (everyone 'hook' the person next to you) or '*munhu wese zora*' (everyone smears butter). These dance styles are verbs which invite audiences to execute actions which when done collectively promote active participation and group oneness.

It is important to highlight that Macheso opens up his performance stage for his various audiences to participate. One of the ways in which the musician opens up the stage is through his slogan, '*Ayaya*',² which he chants while the audience is responding. I have observed that before Macheso begins to perform live on stage for his audience he chants his '*Ayaya*' slogan as a way to capture their attention and focus. The *Ayaya* slogan is usually presented at the beginning of a show to welcome audiences and may later be repeated within the performances. Macheso shouts the slogan, and his audiences always respond enthusiastically shouting back the *Ayaya*. The power of this slogan lies not only in its influence to bind together the band and the audience members as one family, but it is the way in which Macheso opens up the stage for everyone to perform. Through chanting the slogan repeatedly through the performances, the audiences demonstrate and affirm their commitment as co-members within Orchestra Mberikwazvo band.

Macheso also opens up the performance stage by inviting audience members to action. It is through these invitations where Macheso identifies his audience by their real names and by the type of food and drinks they consume; the clothes they wear and the places where they stay. There are songs where Macheso identifies names of his audience members who have turned out to be his supporters. In the song '*Chikuru kurarama*', found on *Dzinosvitsa kure* for example, the musician cites names of people whom, when I first heard the song soon after its release in 2018, I wondered who they were as they are not part of his band. These names include Willard Katsande, Dr Simba, Samson Gwanja, Super hero, among others.

In the song '*Zvimiro*' on *Zvakanaka zvakadaro* Macheso similarly identifies names of people whom he invites to the dance flow. As sung in *Zvimiro* these names include Baba Gumbo, Jimie Jimalo, Jecheche and Prince Dumba among others. My inquiries revealed that these names that

² '*Ayaya*' is a vocal tool or expression similar to, for example, ululation and vocables used in some African music traditions. Macheso uses this tool as a deeply expressive interjection or exclamation to express various emotions such as joy or pain.

Macheso identifies are names of his fans who follow him and who support his work. Such people as Macheso expressed to me '*ndivo varidzi ve Orchestra Mberikwazvo*' (these are the people who own Orchestra Merikwazvo) (Interview with author, 2020). The value that Macheso gives to his audiences allows them to have a feeling of ownership of his style and opens-up his performance stage to everyone. Macheso's *sungura* should thus be studied as a style that involves the collective performance by both audiences and performers.

With songs such as '*Macharangwanda*', '*Zvimiro*' and '*Chaungada chose*' where Macheso engages his audiences to take part in the performance of his music through identifying certain activities which define their lifestyles, *sungura* becomes a space where audiences enact their identities. In the song '*Macharangwanda*' from the album *Kwatakatabva mitunhu* (2012), for example, there is section where Macheso turns to his audience asking them to confirm their presence by raising and publicly show certain items from fashion-related ones to food such as *Kirango* and 100% weave. *Kirango* is a cheap type of beer which has become popular especially with low class urban young men. I observed during live shows that when Macheso calls to his audience *Kirango* drinkers to show their presence, massive screams of confirmation are usually heard. I also noticed that when the musician asks those putting on Expression (a type of braid which is more expensive than other ordinary braids) or 100% weave (an expensive type of a hairstyle) to show their presence, ladies wearing such hairstyles and those without would want to be identified with such fashionable hair styles.

In the song '*Chaungada chose*' Macheso also draws his audiences to participate through identifying and mimicking the jobs they engage in. In the song Macheso says:

Chero mahwindi tikazvipa nguva dzeedu Even touts, if we give ourselves time
Vangani vedu tiri kugara upenyu nekuda kwe: Many of us are surviving through:
Town yese, Kopakabana, Charge office, City,
Mbare, Fiyo, Glennora, Masimbiti
Makoni nepakati
*Tafara, Mabvuku, Chizhanje, kwaBhogo*³

This section of '*Chaungada chose*' found on *Zvinoda kutendwa* showcases and presents *chihwindi* (touting) as a job which can sustain livelihood. Mimicking the *chihwindi* tone and their everyday language, this section is enjoyed passionately within Macheso's performances. Because Macheso here imitates activities familiar to his audiences and which for some of them define their lifestyle, his lyrics are effortlessly sung by his audiences.

By drawing his performances on aspects that are familiar and that define particular lifestyles for certain groups of people in Zimbabwe, Macheso attracts his audiences to participate in his music creating opportunities for them to express themselves. While Macheso identifies types of drink that his audiences can afford, the places that they live, the hair styles that they wish to wear and the types of jobs they do in town, his aim as he sings in '*Chaungada chose*' is to encourage his audiences to work hard and improve their situations. As such, the practices and activities Macheso's audiences perform through *sungura* are not only 'individual expressions of how they see themselves and how they wish others to see them', but they are also 'the means

³ These are names of suburbs in Harare.

by which [they] come to be what [they] are' (Loxley, 2007: 118). This confirms Goffman's observation that 'individuals take roles, desired self-identifications that emerge from their enactment, even if not always consciously, and infuse their performances with signs "which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts" about who they are that otherwise might remain unnoticed' (as cited in Papadopoulou, 2015: 86).

Reasons for Listening to *Sungura*

In this section, I move on to explore reasons behind Macheso's audience's attraction to his music, showing how their identities explored above inform their choices. In connection with the active audience theory, part of the interviewed Macheso's audience passionately follow Macheso's musical activities in various ways such that most of them demonstrated knowledge of the musician's repertoire from the time he started to perform in the 1990s up to date. Some of the audience members even know the majority of Macheso's song lyrics by head. In relation to live show attendance, I have interacted with Macheso's fans who cannot afford to miss any of his shows especially when he is performing within the country; they follow him wherever he performs. It is also important for me to mention that amongst Macheso's audiences discussed are audiences who regard themselves as co-artists within Orchestra Mberikwazvo, as they also volunteer financial support to ensure development of this style.

One of the things that attracts Macheso's audience to him is their view and appreciation of Macheso as one of the talented and best musicians in Zimbabwe whose work is a product of apparent effort and hard work. Comments such as 'Macheso *isimbi hombe*', 'Macheso *anodambura wire*', 'Macheso *chibaba*' which all translate to mean someone who is thoroughly good at something, were quite common among the audience members that I interviewed. Macheso's bass guitar prowess is especially attractive to his fans. One of the fans commented: 'when I go to Macheso's shows, I always look forward to the sections where he plays his bass...the instrumentals are just good' (Interview, 2020). In '*Chaungada chose*' Macheso declares his set standard to the best in his work when he says '*nesu vemagitare tikaaridza nemo nemo nekushaura zvakana vanhu vofara*' (we musicians should be committed to our work and that way we will successfully make our audiences happy). Commenting on Macheso's work Gerald said:

I am inspired by *mukoma* [brother] Macheso, I am inspired to do whatever I do wholeheartedly. Macheso challenges me to work hard. If you look at the way he does his music, he takes his time before releasing. I think he does not want to give his fans half-baked cakes. (Interview with author, 2020)

As such, Macheso's music is appreciated by his audiences because of its quality. These sentiments which relate to appreciation of the quality of Macheso's work are also in connection with the audiences' view that Macheso is authentic, that is his work is a result of 'real' experiences of himself and his audiences. Writing about authenticity in popular music, Moore (2002: 212) expresses that 'music must seem to reflect the identity and experiences of the composer or

performer, as if to say “this is what it’s like to be me”. Thus, ‘authentic music speaks the truth about a group, community or subculture’ (Grossberg, 1993: 202).

There are songs such as ‘*Mundikumbuke*’ from *Simbaradzo* which have been inspired by Macheso’s personal background. I have personally watched Macheso shedding tears while playing this song because, for him, it is based on the true story of his painful background as he revealed to me. Despite his fame and social status in Zimbabwe, Macheso is not ashamed to disclose to his audiences through song the realities of his roots, which are defined by rural poverty. Macheso believes that his success story is grounded upon his early rural life experiences and this story can never be meaningful without making reference to these early life experiences.

One of Macheso’s audiences that I interacted with also commented the following in connection with what the performance of ‘*Mundikumbuke*’ implies to the musician and his listeners. He said the following:

That man is real, I tell you. That’s what I want from his music. He doesn’t fake. *Ndakamboenda pa show yaMacheso paakaridza Mundikumbuke akachema misodzi so, haana kutizopedza kuiridza.* (I once attended Macheso’s show where he cried while playing the song ‘*Mundikumbuke*’, he could not finish playing the song. I saw him crying...I was touched). (Interview with author, 2020)

Because the song ‘*Mundikumbuke*’ is based on real social issues typical to many in the post-colonial Zimbabwean environment, their emotional impact resonates with various experiences of its listeners. One audience member also expressed the following:

Song iyi ndikairidza ndinonzwa misodzi kubuda ndobva ndatanga kufunga mhamha vangu na baba vakashaika ndichiri mudikisa chaizvo, kana face dzavo hapana wandinoziva. So, every time ndikaridza mundikumbuke painoti amai ndasara ndega ndinodzamirwa ne song.

(If I play the song, I feel like crying because it revives the memories of my mother and father who passed away when I was still very young. I cannot even recall their faces. So every-time I play ‘*Mundikumbuke*’ when it says ‘Mother I am left alone’ its meaning is very deep for me). (Interview with author, 2020)

Indeed, as one of respondents explained, Macheso’s music ‘speaks to our ideals’ (Interview, 2019). Released in 2000 a time when, according to (Zagheni, 2011), HIV and AIDS hit hard in Zimbabwe leading to unprecedented excess mortality, songs such as ‘*Mundikumbuke*’ which represents lonely and bleeding voices of those left by their parents become relevant to many people directly and indirectly affected by the mortalities. Their performance offers a platform to release and reflect on particular emotions while for Macheso’s audiences listening to them revives lived experiences and memories.

As such, ideas of authenticity determine how Macheso’s audiences appreciate and respond to Macheso’s music and as Thornton (1995: 26) argues the quality of being authentic ‘is perhaps the most valuable quality that can be ascribed to music’. Anttonen (2017: 80) also further

explained that ‘constructions of authenticity hold significant power, especially in value judgments: with these, some artists are deemed valuable’.

This authenticity that Macheso’s audiences confirm to be present within his music enables audiences who have encountered similar experiences to relate closely with what the musician sings about. Tapiwa, for example, explained the following:

If it were not my background, I would not have been a fan of Macheso’s music. I grew up in the rural areas, *ku Chiweshe uko tichifudza mombe, tichifamba netsoka kuenda kuchikoro...ndakarara upenyu hwekumusha* [in Chiweshe, we would look after cattle, and we would go to school without shoes...that’s my rural experiences]. So, when I am listening to Macheso’s music, I find my rural background there...the life that taught me hard-work and resilience to any circumstances. That attracts me to his music because *kumusha ndiko kwakaumba hwaro hweupenyu hwangu* [my roots are in the rural areas]. So, for me even if today I am a university graduate, my early rural childhood background shaped my focus which is what I find in Macheso’s songs like... that attracts me to *sungura*. (Interview with author, 2020)

Citing Macheso’s songs such as ‘*Baba*’ which talks about a child who would go to school without shoes, Tapiwa explained how it was common for children to go school without shoes in the rural areas where he did his primary education. Tapiwa’s class background attracted him to Macheso’s music despite his current social class. Thus, growing up within a specific cultural environment not only makes a person more conscious of that place’s cultural politics but also makes them more likely to react to those politics during social encounters (Reeves et al., 2015).

While Eyre (2001: 33) observes that *sungura* is ‘ridiculed’ by urban intellectuals, the dispositions of people, that is, background and beliefs largely determine their engagement with *sungura*. I have interacted with intellectuals who, despite their current status, are attracted to Macheso’s *sungura* because the music is a reflection of their personal childhood experiences which they were exposed to as they grew up in rural areas. Through listening to *sungura*, they reflect on the backgrounds that shaped their life and reimagine the events that led them to breakthrough. I, therefore, wish to expand Eyre’s observation arguing that Macheso’s music appeals not only to low class people in the rural areas and growth points but to those whose current status is defined by rural lifestyles.

One of the aspects that attracts Macheso’s audience to his music is that they value the meanings which they obtain from the majority of his lyrics and they appropriate these to their everyday lived circumstances. Articulating his attraction to Macheso’s music, one of the audience members explained to me that ‘often Macheso sings what we live...it’s like his song book is drawn from our daily lives’ (Interview with author, 2020). A number of my respondents confirmed this point as shown by their various listening experiences. Chamunorwa, a bus operator, explained the following:

Macheso anoshanda nesu. Tinofamba nemabhazi parefu tichivaraidzwa nemurume uya. chikuru pa music yake anoimba nezvedu kunge tinomuudzira nyaya dzedu. Kwandiri ndinomutora semumwe wedu nokuti anotiziva.

(Macheso works with us. We travel with buses for long distances playing his music. The most important thing about his music is that he sings about our stories as if we would have told him about them. To me I consider him to be one of us because he knows us). (Interview with author, 2020)

When Chamunorwa started his transport business, it was not easy. Song such as '*Chaungada chose*' which encourages resilience inspired him to realise his potential. Today, Chamunorwa considers Macheso's music as a pushing agent which gives him energy to move on and he attributes his success to hard work, an inspiration that he obtained from Macheso's music. For that reason, Chamunorwa cannot separate Macheso's work from his own work and he has appointed himself as promoter of Macheso's work. This confirms Swidler (1986) idea that culture, including music, can be used as a cultural toolkit to improve the social value of the self. Hence, a certain Macheso fan metaphorically likened *sungura* to *sadza* saying that '*kusiya sungura kwakafanana nekusiya sadza* (life without *sungura* is like life without *sadza*) (Interview, 2019). *Sadza* is Zimbabwe's staple food which most people depend on for their daily survival.

Citing Macheso's songs '*1940*' and '*Baba vaSandy*', Tobias also commented the following in relation to how he finds Macheso's music resonating with his daily experiences:

I haven't met Macheso personally and I haven't gone to any of his shows because I live away from town... but to me when I listen to his music it's like I am listening to my brother...he is like one of us here...his messages are familiar; he sings like he has been in our family or in my village. (Interview with author, 2020)

With its lyrics, '*panorima vamwe newe rimawo, ndizvo ukohwedzane nevamwe*' (when other farmers are farming do likewise so that when they reap you also reap), the song '*1940*' presents the various activities done by peasant farmers such as Tobias for their daily survival. On the other hand, '*Baba vaSandy*' discourages child abuse and domestic violence which, as Tobias confirmed, have become common problems in Zimbabwe's rural families. As such, while Tobias has never attended any of Macheso's shows he has managed to closely connect with the music because his family and community life are reflected through it.

Macheso's audiences also value his music for its message as most of them believe is meant to teach *hunhu*. Confirming this idea to promote *hunhu* through his *sungura* Macheso revealed '*donzvo ndererairo inovaka nekukurudzira rudo nekugarisana mudzimba*' (the aim is to give constructive teachings encouraging love and harmony within families). Explaining why they choose to listen to Macheso's *sungura*, some audience members said the following:

Listener 1 said:

I value his teachings and always sing along to his life changing lyrics. (Interview with author, 2019)

Listener 2:

Totenda chaizvo; dzimba zhinji dzamira kubudikidza nemashoko avo akakomba avanoimba.

[We are very grateful; many marriages have been saved because of his message.]
(Interview with author, 2019)

Listener 3:

Ndingangoti music yaMachecho haityisi kana kuzezesa kuteerera nekuimba chero uri payi zvapo. Kune vanoimba zvinyadzi zvinofumura hunhu, vamwe ndivo vanoshoropodza vatungamiri venyika. Macheso anozikanwa nekupa vanhu vose ruremekedzo panzvimbo dzavo.

(I may say I feel comfortable to listen or to sing Macheso's music anywhere. There are some who sing obscene language and some who sing against political leaders. Macheso is popular for respecting people in their different positions.) (Interview with author, 2019)

As shown from the above extracts, Macheso's music is valued for its ability to help its listeners deal with their social problems in morally acceptable ways. Exploring causes of and possible solutions to problems related to hunger, theft, child abuse and unfaithfulness in marriage Macheso's *sungura* 'gives hope, it comforts... [it] is like an antidepressant of some sort'. (Interview with author, 2019)

Conclusions

My analysis of how Macheso's audiences engage with his music suggests that the different backgrounds of his audiences and the socio-economic environments in which they live determine the extent of their involvement with this style of music. The Macheso's audiences gain the willpower to work hard in an endeavour to overcome life difficulties by using *sungura* as a toolbox. As a result, contrary to what Muwati et al. (2013: 113) claim, Macheso's listeners are not always individuals who 'continue to languish in deplorable poverty', but rather those who have realised their capacity to free themselves from various sorts of poverty. Despite the challenges they encounter in their day to day lives within and outside Zimbabwean borders, the audiences' involvement with *sungura* gives them confidence and courage to 'hustle' for a better life as they envision 'self-reliance, progress, and self-improvement' (Bruinders, 2012: 63) through this style.

Biographical Note

Vimbai Chamisa (PhD) is an ethnomusicologist whose research interests lie within popular music studies focusing particularly on music and gender representation, music and identity, music and sustainable development as well as music and politics. She is a Lecturer in the department of Music Business, Musicology and Technology in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Midlands State University in Zimbabwe. Vimbai has published in peer-reviewed journals within her areas of interest.

(For publications, see <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4504-7123>)

Contact: 58555587@mylife.unisa.ac.za

References

- Abercrombie, N and Longhurst, B (1998), *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*, London: Sage.
- Anttonen, S (2017), *A Feel for the Real: Discourses of Authenticity in Popular Music Cultures through Three Case Studies*, PhD dissertation. University of Eastern Finland.
- Baym, NK (2012), 'Fans or Friends?: Seeing Social Media Audiences as Musicians Do' in *Participations: Journal of Audiences and Reception Studies*, 9:2: pp. 286-316.
- Beattie, M (2025), "Everything to Everyone?": Canadian National Identity and the Barenaked Ladies' in *Participations: Journal of Audiences and Reception Studies*, 21:1: pp. 157-173.
- Bennett, L (2012), 'Music Audiences: An Introduction' in *Participations: Journal of Audiences and Reception Studies*, 9:2: pp. 200-205.
- Bruinders, SR (2012), *Parading Respectability: An Ethnography of the Christmas Bands Movement in the Western Cape, South Africa*, PhD dissertation. University of Illinois.
- Chamisa, V (2023), 'Singing for and on Behalf of the Subaltern: An Analysis of Alick Macheso's *Sungura*' in *Mankind Quarterly*, 64:2: pp. 261-278. <https://doi.org/10.46469/mq.2023.64.2.5>.
- Chitando, E and Mapuranga, TP (2016), in Chitando, E and van Klinken, A (eds) *Christianity and Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa*, Abingdon: Routledge pp. 171-183.
- Crenshaw, K (1989), 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics' in *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989:1: pp. 139-167.
- Eyre, B (2001), *Playing with Fire: Fear and Self-censorship in Zimbabwean Music*, Copenhagen: Freemuse.
- Grossberg, L (1993), in Frith, S, Goodwin, A and Grossberg, L (eds) *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, London: Routledge pp. 185-209.
- Jones, JL (2010), 'Nothing Is Straight in Zimbabwe': The Rise of the *Kukiya-kiya* Economy 2000-2008' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36:2: pp. 285-299.
- Kufakurinani, U and Mwatwara, L (2017), 'Zimdancehall and the Peace Crisis in Zimbabwe' in *African Conflict and Peace Building Review*, 7:1: pp. 33-50.

- Kyker, JW (2013), *Oliver Mtukudzi: Living Tuku Music in Zimbabwe*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Loxley, J (2007), *Performativity*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Manase, I (2009), 'Zimbabwean Urban Grooves and Their Subversive Performance Practices' in *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 35:1: pp. 56-67.
- Mate, R (2021), 'Looking for Money': Hustling, Youth Survival Strategies and Schizoid Subjectivities in Zimbabwe's Crisis' in *African Identities*, 21:2: pp. 355-374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2021.1913095>.
- Moore, A (2002), 'Authenticity as Authentication' in *Popular Music*, 21:2: pp. 209-223.
- Muwati, I, Gambahaya, Z and Mutasa, DE (2013), 'A Potentially Dystrophic Era: Analysing the Lyrical Sociology of Selected *Sungura* Songs in Zimbabwe in the 1990s and Beyond' in *Muziki: Journal of Music Research in Africa*, 10:1: pp. 107-121.
- Papadopoulou, M (2015), *Music Rituals and Social Division: Constructing, Performing, and Legitimizing the Social Self*, PhD dissertation. Cardiff University.
- Perman, T (2012), 'Sungura in Zimbabwe and the Limits of Cosmopolitanism' in *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 21:3: pp. 374-401.
- Pitts, SE and Price, SM (2020), *Understanding Audience Engagement in the Contemporary Arts*, London: Routledge.
- Reeves, A, Gilbert, E and Holman, D (2015), 'Class Dis-identification, Cultural Stereotypes, and Music Preferences: Experimental Evidence from the UK' in *Poetics*, 50, [online] available: https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/86255/3/WRRO_86255.pdf [accessed: 22 April 2026].
- Schechner, R (2003), *Performance Theory*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Small, C (1998), *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Swidler, A (1986), 'Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies' in *American Sociological Review*, 51:2: pp. 273-286.
- Thornton, S (1995), *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Turino, T (2008), *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Zagheni, E (2011), 'The Impact of the HIV/AIDS Epidemic on Kinship Resources for Orphans in Zimbabwe' in *Population and Development Review*, 37:4: pp. 761-783.

Audio-visual references

- 1940* (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2005)
- Baba* (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2018)
- Baba vaSandy* (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2005)
- Chaungada chose* (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2012)
- Chikuru kurarama* (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2018)
- Hupenyu hwemunhu* (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2005)
- Macharangwanda* (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2012)
- Madhuwe* (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2007)

Mundikumbuke (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2000)
Murume (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2007)
Pfuma yacho (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2018)
Sarah (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 1998)
Zuro ndizuro (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2020)
Zvimiro (Alick Macheso and Orchestra Mberikwazvo, 2003)

Appendix A: Profiles of Research Respondents

Table 1: Demographic and biographical summary of key research participants. All names are pseudonyms.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Range	Occupation / Key Biographic Detail
Tendai	F	30-40	Single mother, divorced. Owns a music promotion company in Harare.
Tapiwa	M	40-50	University lecturer. Had a difficult rural childhood; sees education as a transformative force.
Kurai	M	30-40	University graduate (Masters) based in South Africa. Relocated for work after struggling to find employment in Zimbabwe.
Chido	F	30-40	Married. Vendor. Has two Ordinary Level passes (Ordinary level is a secondary school leaving qualification) and hopes to enroll in teachers' college.
Tobias	M	40-50	Peasant farmer. Dropped out of school in Form 2 due to financial challenges. Lives in a rural area with his family.
Simbarashe	M	30-40	Married. Did not pass Ordinary Level. Family lives rurally; he does manual jobs in the city to support them.
Upenyu	M	20-30	Artisanal miner. Rents a room in the city; self-identifies as a 'hustler'.
Chamunorwa	M	50-60	Successful businessman and politician. Owns a fleet of buses. Started with a small taxi; attributes success to hard work.
Gerald	M	30-40	Professional footballer for a South African club. Rose from a rural primary school to a professional career through dedication.
Julius	M	20-30	Completed O-Levels. Worked as an artisanal miner before migrating to South Africa for better opportunities.