



Oliver Mtukudzi: The Art of Protest

By Isaac Otidi Amuke



'As far as Africa is concerned, music cannot be for enjoyment. It has to be for revolution.'

- Fela Anikulapo Kuti.

On Wednesday January 23 2018, as Zimbabwean and one of Africa's most celebrated musicians Oliver Mtukudzi took his final bow in Harare aged 66, the floodgates of debate opened. Who was this cultural colossus? What about his politics cast against the turbulent reality of Zimbabwe? There is global consensus that Mtukudzi was a musical giant, but away from the music, nuanced conversations were happening. Was Mtukudzi modeled in the image of Franco Luambo Makiadi, who towed Mobutu Sese Seko's line to stay in favour and keep producing music, or was he a Fela Kuti, a no-holds-barred bold anti-establishment figure?

There is little evidence to suggest that Mtukudzi was explicitly either a Franco or Fela replica - at least politically speaking. His loyal fans insist that he was simply Tuku, a man who handled his music and politics with a delicate balance as to allow himself the license to keep singing and touring, while avoiding the tempting trap of complicity by siding with the oppressors. One needs to revisit a little history to understand the obsession with situating a certain generation and caliber of African artists - a classification Mtukudzi belonged - within the prevailing political circumstances in their home countries.

During the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, musicians such as Hugh Masekela and Miriam

Makeba, alongside writers and poets such as *Keorapetse Kgosisile* and Dennis Brutus, deployed their celebrity status to shape events both at home and abroad, thereby succeeding in drawing global attention to the plight of a segregated and oppressed Black population. Makeba, using the personal-is-political strategy, insisted that her music was not political, hastening to add – possibly as a caveat – that she only sang about truth. To her listeners across the world, what Makeba called truth was equated to her broadcasting the malevolent experiences suffered by Black South Africans, in effect deploying music to camouflage her anti-apartheid campaign. Makeba did not need to announce her politics from rooftops, because she was living her politics out loud for everyone to see and hear.

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When Hugh Masekela, arrived in exile in the United States, he was still confused about what genre of music to pursue. He was mimicking a lot of American jazz before Miles Davis urged him to stick to the Southern Africa sound he had been experimenting with and take his time before digging his heels in politically. He benefitted from the counsel of African American musical greats such as Harry Belafonte, who persuaded Masekela against returning to South Africa to bury his mother. Belafonte feared that the young Masekela had not built the influence needed to restrain the apartheid regime from arresting and imprisoning him. In time, Masekela slowly built the requisite stature, joining the likes of Makeba in using music to tell their country's story. Like Makeba, Masekela was not overtly political outside his music, but his compositions did not hide his position.

On his part, the poet Dennis Brutus – like his Nigerian counterpart Christopher Okigbo – went all out. Brutus put his poetry aside for a moment and successfully campaigned for the banning of South Africa from the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo, Japan. By the time the announcement of the ban was made, Brutus, who had returned home to South Africa, was already serving jail time in Robben Island – locked up in a prison cell next to that of Nelson Mandela – for his activities against the apartheid regime. On leaving jail, Brutus fled South Africa, banned from writing and publishing in the country.

Okigbo seemingly faced with limited choices took up arms to fight alongside his Igbo kin during the Biafra war, an act which resulted in the poet's death in combat. Okigbo's passing deeply affected his contemporary Chinua Achebe who eulogized him through his *'Dirge for Okigbo'* resulting in Achebe leaving Nigeria and assuming the role of Biafra's ambassador at large. Earlier, before the fighting had taken root, the poet and playwright Wole Soyinka appointed himself mediator between the two warring sides secretly meeting Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, leader of the breakaway Republic of Biafra. This act saw Soyinka imprisoned for two years by the country's military dictatorship. Closer home, in 1970s repressive Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiongo was detained following the staging of his play *'Ngaahika Ndeeda'* – Gikuyu for 'I Will Marry When I Want' – after the state considered Ngugi's actions seditious.

Like Makeba and Masekela, Mtukudzi fought a battle of memory. He may not have had a political-heavy discography but he took up the battle identity that ensured that his people would not forget themselves, in the process ensuring Africa and the world did not forget his people.

By consciously keeping away from overt political commentary in Zimbabwe, Mtukudzi in a way chose to look beyond Zimbabwe much as he was looking right into his country's eyes, his life mission being to make the rest of the world see, feel, touch, smell and taste the best of Zimbabwe's culture and artistry. To some, this was enough. To others, Tuku's apolitical nature was akin to neutrality, construed as complicity.

On the first Friday night after the passing of Mtukudzi, I made a midnight dash to Sippers, the Nairobi Rhumba hideaway, looking to find out who Mtukudzi was and what he represented in the eyes of my interlocutors. Following his long career that stretched decades of performances across Africa and the West, the man known as one of Zimbabwe's finest exports – according to his daughter Selmour – built a global following.

“He put Zimbabwe on the map,” said Selmour, who is also a musician of note. “He’s the biggest export from Zimbabwe, and all artists look up to him, to get to his level and surpass it. He set the gold standard.”

In Kenya, Mtukudzi's huge following first originated from his popular hit *Todii* – which is all that a sizeable chunk of his fans knew about the man and his music. Mtukudzi also made frequent appearances in the Nairobi concert circuit, earning himself a more discerning followership that went beyond *Todii*. Much as the song is popular with revelers across Africa and beyond, *Todii* was born out of one of Mtukudzi's saddest life experiences. In 1996, four members of Black Spirit, Mtukudzi's band – including his younger brother Robert Mtukudzi, with whom he started his musical journey – got infected with HIV/AIDS. All the four succumbed to the disease, dying within a two-month window of each other's death.

“I wrote *Todii* to address the HIV/AIDS stigma,” Mtukudzi told an interviewer in 2015. “It was a song meant to help start a difficult conversation, which many people didn't know how to go about.”

It is safe to say that Mtukudzi was one of a group of African musicians – alongside the likes of Masekela – who were adopted by Kenyans as one of their own, invited back time and again for representing something which was at once soothing and liberating, always reminding their audiences that Africa was still one. Musically, Kenya has struggled to produce artistic personas of such stature, much as it has had an abundance of gifted musicians – such as the late Ayub Ogada – some of whom have even collaborated musically with these African greats. For various reasons, Kenya's cultural glue doesn't hold tight enough. Benga, for instance, a Kenyan sound which was exported across Africa and beyond during the 1970s, still struggles to pass for the quintessential Kenyan musical experience partly because it is reduced to the 'ethnic' categorization, while artists from other African countries who sing in their languages are embraced as transcendent cultural icons. To cure this void, Kenya has found itself perpetually looking outside, to the likes of Mtukudzi.

“My impression of Mtukudzi was heavily influenced by the white neo-liberal view of him,” said Oketch, a Kenyan professor of philosophy who spent years living and studying in the West. “Every summer, for as long as I remember, Mtukudzi was invited to Chicago, where he sometimes performed alongside his countryman Thomas Mapfumo. To the white crowd, he was this big deal African performer. That was my earliest introduction to the man – an African revered by the concert going Western crowd.”

For some critics, Mtukudzi fits the criteria of the African export to the West – which in some quarters translates to being a sellout. Nonetheless, Mtukudzi did not limit his performances to Western capitals. Tuku possibly performed across Africa and in Zimbabwe in particular as much as he did away from home, building a solid homegrown fanbase.

Mtukudzi and Mapfumo were one time bandmates in their youthful years, playing for the Wagon Wheel band. Much as they were both influential in the later periods of Zimbabwe's liberation struggle, Mapfumo almost always rocked the political boat post-independence in 1980, with Mtukudzi taking the middle ground, both within and outside of his music. As a result of their

different approaches to Zimbabwean politics, Mapfumo was exiled in the early 1990s, while Mtukudzi stayed put, giving Zimbabweans something to hold onto musically in times of serious political tribulations. Mtukudzi christened his music Tuku, drawn from his nickname, while Mapfumo dubbed his sound Chimurenga, continuing to be heavily associated with the liberation movement by the same name. Chimurenga, according to Ntone Edjabe – the Cameroonian DJ, journalist and founder of the Cape Town based Pan-African gazette, the Chimurenga Chronic – means “in the spirit of Murenga”, who was a highly revered Shona liberation hero.

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“He was a Shona who was loved by the Ndebele,” said Irene who is a Kenyan consultant with a multinational who has worked in a number of African countries. “I was once told of how when my friend’s sister arrived in Zimbabwe from an overseas trip, she came across one of the largest crowds she had ever seen in Harare. On asking what the occasion was she was informed it was an Oliver Mtukudzi concert. That is how much the man was loved in his motherland.”

In many African countries, political competition gets highly divisive, setting communities against each other. Zimbabwe was no exception. *Gukurahundi* – a Shona term loosely translated to mean “the early rain that washes away the chaff before the spring rains” – was a series of massacres carried out against the Ndebele population by the Zimbabwean army under Robert Mugabe between 1983 and 1987. It was believed to have emanated from the rivalry between the two dominant political parties, ZANU led by Mugabe, a Shona, and ZAPU, led by Mugabe’s fellow liberation stalwart Joshua Nkomo, a Ndebele. The killings were intended to quell a supposed impending rebellion against the Mugabe state, resulting in thousands of deaths. This has remained one of the darkest patches in Zimbabwe’s history – just like Biafra for Nigeria. Therefore, the acknowledgment that Mtukudzi, a Shona, was celebrated in Ndebele land despite the painful historical fissures goes a long way in signifying the power of Tuku.

“I credit Mtukudzi with maintaining Zimbabwe’s cultural momentum,” Irene said, “something which a number of African countries lost post-independence. In that way, he became an invaluable national asset, a symbol of resilience, and a Pan-African treasure. If there is one thing we have continuously been reminded of as Africans, it is that you lose momentum, you lose the struggle. By singing about love, life, loss, Mtukudzi reminded us of what being Zimbabwean and living the Zimbabwean and African experience felt like, reinforcing the idea of art as the natural adhesive that holds societies together.”

Mtukudzi gave Zimbabwe what Fela gave to Nigeria – artistic endurance. Tuku was not Zimbabwe’s Fela, because Zimbabwe might not have needed a Fela with the presence of a robust liberation movement that solidly rallied around a beloved Robert Mugabe, before the man turned rogue. On the other hand, Nigeria had a series of coup d’états after independence, resulting in successive military dictatorships that Fela felt obliged to keep resisting. The Fela comparison therefore only went as far as Mtukudzi’s artistic staying power, that he was perpetually present, towering in the lives of Zimbabweans from the time of the liberation struggle onwards – metaphorically holding the country’s hand through the good, the bad and the ugly.

“Why do we sing, why is there art?” Mtukudzi posed during the 2015 interview, grappling with the

question of the role of art and artists, explaining his life's work. "Art is to give life and hope to the people. Art is for healing broken hearts. Like in Zimbabwe, you don't sing a song when you have nothing to say."

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In Mobutu Sese Seko's Zaire - the home of Rhumba - standing up to the strongman, whether an artist or politician, was like buying one's one-way ticket to prison, or at worse, writing one's obituary. It therefore took the likes of Papa Wemba - whose cultural contribution is not fully appreciated by many outside the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) - to use their artistic influence to start cracking Mobutu's edifice, covertly. As Mobutu enforced his Zaireanization program, asking the Congolese to denounce Western influence - including fashion and names - Papa Wemba led a quiet rebellion by reimagining fashion, starting a sartorial elegance movement which did not fall within Mobutu's categorization of Western clothing, but equally didn't fit into African fashion as imagined by the President.

This created sufficient middle ground occupied by those who wished to defy Mobutu and his politics covertly, without necessarily going to the streets to battle against military tanks. Fashion therefore became a weapon, a place of solace, an assertion of personal and collective defiance, a reclamation of self-dignity. This gave way to the rise of the La Sape (Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes d'Élégance, translated as the "Society of Atmosphere-setters and Elegant People") to which Papa Wemba became the unofficial leader, influenced by fashion trends in Milan and Paris - directly challenging Mobutu's anti-European sentiment, and by extension challenging his politics. It was the perfect illustration of soft power.

Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe - like Mobutu's Zaire - morphed into a cesspool which ordinarily results in artists being pressured to use their art for something bigger. Mtukudzi therefore found himself under the spotlight, seeing that his contemporary Thomas Mapfumo who some insist is the closest Zimbabwe has gotten to having a Fela, both musically and politically had long drawn the line on the sand and declared all-out war on Mugabe, just as he did with the colonialists before that. Yet Mtukudzi refused to get directly drawn into the politics of the day, by all indications pulling a Papa Wemba-like soft power move - picking to fight on the cultural frontline - because sometimes one has to pick their battles. There are those who will condemn Tuku for his apolitical stance, just as there are those who will understand where the man was coming from, because sometimes, under such strenuous circumstances, there is only so much one can do.

On that cultural frontline, there was one significant battle that Mtukudzi successfully waged in seeking to preserve the essence of Zimbabwean music. The genesis of Mtukudzi's pushback, as documented in "*Shades of Benga*" - a seminal work on Kenyan music history by Tabu Osusa's Ketebul Music - started with the appointment of the Kenyan music producer Oluoch Kanindo as the regional representative for the international music label EMI Records. Kanindo became so instrumental in EMI's Africa operations to a point of earning the privilege of jet setting across the continent, to seal recording and distribution deals.

Thanks to Kanindo's infiltration of the African market through his Sungura and Kanindo record

labels, both of which exploited the EMI music distribution networks – the Kenyan sound, Benga, became popular in East and Southern Africa, going as far as being one of the more popular sounds among Zimbabwean freedom fighters. Benga started influencing Zimbabwean music especially in the late 1970s when Kanindo was in his musical prime as a producer. It was off the back of this musical invasion that Mtukudzi made a conscious decision to pushback against it, seeking to preserve the Shona and Ndebele traditional sounds, leading to the birth of Tuku. The influence of Benga was so strong that there are proponents who hold that much as he worked overtime to become a Zimbabwean purist, Mtukudzi borrowed elements of his music from Benga. This monumental pushback illustrates Tuku's sense of eternal cultural patriotism.

Oliver Mtukudzi was born in September 1952 in Highfield, a Harare township with historic significance as one of the founding hotspots of Zimbabwe's independence movement. As if predestined to be a musician, Mtukudzi's parents had met during a choir competition, passing down the music bug to their eldest son, Oliver and his younger brother Robert, who became bandmates in Mtukudzi's Black Spirits. In the early 1970s, the two brothers started experimenting with music and landed in trouble for sneaking out of the house to play at a local beer parlor. It was here that Mtukudzi got a rare opportunity to have his first encounter with an electric guitar, getting in trouble with his parents, who were against their two sons' pursuit of a career in music.

"I played the guitar so well," Mtukudzi recalled, "such that the following day, those at the beer parlor reported to my father how talented I was. It was the one time my father hit me, for sneaking out of the house and spending time at the beer parlor in pursuit of music."

As fate would have it, the self-taught guitarist who began experimenting, looking for his own unique sound that had observers saying he didn't play the guitar right – would land his big break while sitting right in front of his family home in Highlife. Brighton Matebere, at the time a leading journalist with the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, had a love interest on Mtukudzi's street, and regularly ran into the young Mtukudzi practicing with his guitar outside his family house whenever he came around to visit his girlfriend. Matebere was impressed by Mtukudzi's skills and invited him to perform during his radio show. It was his impressive performance during the radio interview that resulted in Mtukudzi getting his first recording deal in 1975, never to look back again. Later, in 1977, he joined Wagon Wheel band, alongside Thomas Mapfumo.

"When I left school I did not get a job for at least three years," Mtukudzi revisited the birth of his politics, from where he learnt to hide in his music. "Blacks were not allowed to apply for jobs, but the colonialists didn't think of art as a weapon that could be used against them. So they allowed us to sing. It was therefore up to the artist to help the nation heal and grow. We used idioms and proverbs, knowing that Shona speakers would decipher the coded messages we were passing across without being explicitly political."

67 albums later, Mtukudzi still spoke as if he was in search of what to call a career, telling Forbes Africa in 2016, "I am yet to decide on a career to take on, because this is not a career for me. I am just doing me."

As debate rages on about Mtukudzi's legacy, Mtukudzi made things easier by summing it all up himself in 2015.

"Pakare Paye is my legacy," he said, "the legacy I am leaving behind for youngsters to get somewhere where they can showcase what they do best. My generation and I didn't have similar opportunities."

The Pakare Paye Arts Center, meaning 'that place', is an expansive piece of real estate which Mtukudzi transformed from a rundown junkyard into a state of the art facility with recording studios and performance spaces. The center is located in Norton, about 45 kms from Harare. Pakare Paye has become a space for artistic apprentices seeking a soft landing in a country where the government gives little regard to the arts. Yet Pakare Paye remains a reminder of one of Mtukudzi's saddest memories, since he originally built it intending for his only son and bandmate, Sam - who died from a 2010 road accident on his way from the airport - to run it. Following his son's passing, Mtukudzi took a two year hiatus from recording music, returning with *Sarawoga*, meaning "left alone".

"Sam was more of a friend than a son to me," Mtukudzi reminisced. "He was somebody who challenged me, not as a son but as a friend. It made me feel closer to him. He was so talented to a point where I couldn't believe how much he could do musically, because he hadn't had a very long music career."

For now, the family musical baton rests with Selmour, Mtukudzi's daughter.

"Some come and say oh, your children are following in your footsteps," Mtukudzi said, as if diffusing pressure off his children who had taken after him. "That's not true. I made my own steps, and my children make their own steps. God doesn't duplicate talent. So they can't be me. They have to be themselves."

Mtukudzi seems to have made peace with himself - as a father, husband, artist and Zimbabwean - having done what he thought he needed to do as a Zimbabwean cultural vanguard. Yet more was expected of him by those who felt he should have done something, said something, regarding Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. Mtukudzi chose to play cultural politics - and succeeded in safeguarding Zimbabwe's interests on that front both at home and on the global stage - but the political jury is still out on whether that was enough or whether those who demanded more from the man were justified.

In an interview with Kenyan actor and playwright John Sibi-Okumu, journalist and DJ Ntone Edjabe of the Chimurenga Chronic explained, responding to a question on the role of culture in raising public consciousness to tackle societal challenges, "Imagining culture as a tool, as something that can be used for anything but itself as an act of living and an articulation of that life is always dangerous, whether for positive or other reasons," Ntone admitted that indeed art and culture affects society, but putting a weight of expectations on culture becomes inhibitive. "...but yes, aspects of culture, music, literature, film... the production of culture, can bring people together. We've seen this historically."

If art can be left alone for its own sake, should artists, who become influential cultural figures in society, be left alone, or is that an oxymoron? On his part, novelist Chinua Achebe had no internal contradictions on what art is, and what function art plays in society and about the place of art and artists in politics.

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"Those who tell you 'Do not put too much politics in your art' are not being honest," Achebe said during a rare conversation with his African American contemporary James Baldwin. "If you look very carefully, you will see that they are the same people who are quite happy with the situation as it is."

And what they are saying is not don't introduce politics. What they are saying is don't upset the system. They are just as political as any of us. It is only that they are on the other side."

The jury is still out on Tuku's politics, but no one will deny that he was master of his craft.

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