

# Dancehall music and urban identities in Zimbabwe – A constructive postmodern perspective

**Author:**Zorodzai Dube<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

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**Corresponding author:**

Zorodzai Dube,  
zorodzai@yahoo.com

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Dancehall music may be seen as a commentary over the socio-political events that are unfolding in Zimbabwe since 2008, a period characterised by political and economic uncertainty. The study focuses on how this genre of music reflects identities that emerge from the context characterised by the disintegrating state institutions and fragile households. With such a context, dancehall music may be interpreted as offering hope and courage. Notably, the music carries a unique theological injunction where God is called upon to witness and offer strength, not to punish or change the status quo. I call this genre of music wilderness music to explain that the music provides spaces of hope and courage to fragile and less certain identities.

## Introduction

The article builds on two separate articles by Ezra Chitando (2007:334–347) and Maurice Vambe (2004:167–193) who commented on gospel and Chimurenga music, respectively, noting that music acts as commentary on the social realities in Zimbabwe. Chitando focused on gospel music and commented that, far from being spiritual nourishment, gospel music repackages the social needs of the people as laments to God, begging him to intervene. Chitando's insights are located within a context when Zimbabwe experiences political and economic turmoil and the lack of social valves to ease the social tension. Instead of addressing people's needs, President Mugabe's government resorts to violence and suppression, and, left with no choice, people divert their petitions towards God. In addition Maurice Vambe commented on Chimurenga music, which he describes as a form of protest to hold the political leaders accountable (Vambe 2004:164).

Since the writings of Chitando and Vambe, another genre of music with unique theological injunction, dancehall music, has rattled the music scene in Zimbabwe. Dancehall music imitates the Jamaican reggae music, but with local fusions. It appeals to the urban youth who use the music as an expression of their urban identity. I am interested in exploring the connections between the emergence of dancehall music and the social realities that unfolded since 2008 in Zimbabwe, arguing that, in view of the political and economic meltdown that ensued after the disputed presidential and parliamentary elections of 2008, dancehall music emerged as a vehicle to express the youth's identity of resilience. In the process, the music can be interpreted as sarcastically mocking the political leaders for political maladministration. Notably, in most dancehall music there is a narrative of struggle to survive which is juxtaposed alongside a strong attitude of resilience and hope. The phrases that come up frequently in the songs are 'I am suffering', 'I will not give up hope' and 'I will do it'.

Plausibly, the theoretical perspective of constructive postmodern perspective may help to unpack the issues. Constructive postmodernity traces alternative identities that arise within context where traditional institutions such as the state and household have less influence. Within such contexts, the individual is responsible for their own survival and consequently new identities emerge. As such, constructive postmodernity may help to explain how dancehall music reflects identities within a socially and nationally fragmented society, in which at the centre, the individual is left to fend for themselves. Metaphorically, the dancehall music can be described as reflecting wilderness identities, situations characterised by disjuncture and a search for new spaces of meaning.

## Urban music and socio-historical realities since 2008

The year 2008 was a crucial year in Zimbabwe: the eighth since violence and political polarity started in 2000 after the botched land reform programme. By 2008, the country was further divided between the growing urban population that was less in favour of the land reform programme. Instead, they needed food which was no longer coming because the agricultural sector was in disarray. Although

President Mugabe won the 2002 election, this did not appease the international communities whose voice, locally, found expression through the opposition political party - the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The international community, having been angered by President Mugabe's unilateral and chaotic approach to land reform, needed nothing less than a regime change (Ranger 2003:16). The opposition party, the MDC, was a tool in the hands of those who wanted Mugabe out of office (Ranger 2004:215). However, to remain in power, like a young lion cub clinging to a bone, the president used all tactics, including violence and rigging. To increase pressure the western countries – UK, Australia and several European countries, including the United States of America – were unanimous in imposing sanctions upon the fragile country (Norman 2015). This meant that the country could not export, resulting in not having the much needed foreign currency. If a country cannot export, its industries are useless because a country's economic strength is measured by the volume of its trade. By 2008, like a critically sick patient on life support, people were hopeless and did not know where the country was heading.

To make matters worse, the elections of 2008, which pitted the seasoned politician, Robert Mugabe, and the rabble-rouser, Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the opposition party, were crucial to understanding the social identities that emerged. Visibly feeble yet still quick like a viper, President Mugabe knew that if the elections were to be free and fair he was going to hand over the presidency to Mr Tsvangirai – a nightmare President Mugabe was not willing to witness. However, the odds were against the president; there was no food throughout the country (Van Gelder 2007). All retail shops were empty except for vim, a powder used to wash kitchen utensils. Basic items such as sugar, salt and cooking oil were rarely found. The few that were available came from South Africa or Botswana. People had to queue for everything – bread, maize meal and all basic items. Sensing the impending disaster, many people queued at the government offices for the precious passport document to escape from the burning country.

During that time, people who were envied were those who bought groceries from South Africa and sold to the local people. Professions such as teacher, or any other civil occupation, became a source of public joke to those who had failed school. In fact teachers who in normal circumstances are modestly addressed as civil servants were now pejoratively labelled as *evil* servants because education was useless, also because they had aligned themselves with the opposition party against the ruling party of President Mugabe. Water and electricity became scarce and most urban dwellers resorted to digging their own wells at the back of their houses. Those who rent houses, in addition to paying rent, had to pay for a bucket of water. The rural dwellers who normally survive from the fortunes of their relatives in towns were equally affected.

Against all odds, President Mugabe won the second round of the controversial 2008 elections through violence.

He imposed himself over the will of the people. Concerning democracy, Hannah Arendt (1965:21) says, by embarking on demonstration and voting, the majority would hold the executive accountable. This was not so in Zimbabwe, instead, the will of the executive succeeded. To silence all pockets of resistance, the president unleashed the war veterans and youth militias on every part of town and village. Those who supported the opposition party were beaten, maimed, imprisoned and some went missing. President Mugabe is known as an erudite man. But why would he condone such heinous things? It seems that President Mugabe learnt an unconventional tactic to keep himself in power – violence. Democracy is a consultative settlement where one is willing to surrender power for the sake of the majority or the will of the people, but violence assures one's wishes through coercion. You do not provide a culture of democracy to people that you do not want to negotiate with. Thus President Mugabe, using propaganda, had no space for negotiation; all he needed was power, and violence ensured him a culture of fear and docile bodies. Michel Foucault (1985:208), concerning the panoptic, comments that violence and surveillance are tools used by the despotic rulers to create docile bodies.

After 2008, memories of violence were visible through scars on people's bodies. Hopeless, the people had no other way to respond. If the opposition parties were to call for protest or any other form to express discontent, it was likely to be unattended because people were very afraid. Through violence, President Mugabe had achieved his aim of instilling fear and creating docile bodies (Chikuhwa 2004:91). Through visual reality, the appellation that politics is a dirty game became visibly true. More importantly, people realised that the elections had led to more violence and tension and changed nothing. Instead, elections brought more death and furthered economic downward spirals. Gloom and hopelessness characterised the situation in which the democratic space had disappeared. Concerning the public sphere, Habermas (1991:181) says, democratic spaces are nurtured by allowing local communities to debate their collective issues, which is contrary to the Zimbabwean situation, where the only national television station functioned as a mouthpiece for President Mugabe's ruling party, while the communities were muzzled through the presence of militias who terrorised the public.

During this period since 2008, dancehall music emerged and became popular in many urban areas. Plausibly, dancehall music created new identities, which I have dubbed wilderness identities, meaning identities from an ephemeral context.

## Dancehall music – A constructive postmodern approach

The emerging identities from the dancehall music differ from those expressed through gospel and Chimurenga music. Chimurenga music, as Maurice Vambe (2004:164) explains, is protest music that keeps the country's legislature and executive accountable by reminding them of the collective responsibilities. Like Old Testament prophets, Chimurenga

music is prophetic, acting as a moral voice of the voiceless. It reminds the leaders that the liberation war was fought to achieve unity, prosperity for all, thus it attacks leaders who are tempted by greed and self-enrichment.

Gospel music, as Ezra Chitando (2007:334) reveals, does not directly protest, rather it uses religious language as coded protest. In most of the songs, God is the judge and witness to people's experience of suffering, and thus God is summoned to offer hope to the sufferings and to assure them that the structural sins shall be destroyed. Indirectly gospel music reminds those who engage in corrupt activities that temporary joy derived from ill-gotten wealth will not last. As prophets of morality, they remind people to be peaceful, obedient and to work hard because these are the virtues that please God.

In contrast, dancehall music does not seek to remind the political leaders of their constitutional obligations; instead, it appeals to God to witness only. Like the Old Testament character, Job, God is called upon to witness but not to indict. Because the political space does not allow protest, God is only summoned to offer more strength and courage to the victims. Plausibly, to borrow the biblical motif, dancehall music may be described as wilderness music where the complainant begs God for more courage. It is music of surrender. It does not engage the political establishment, but focuses on the creativity of the individual who needs hope and strength to continue amidst pain.

Plausibly, the theoretical perspective of constructive postmodernism may help to explain the identities reflected through dancehall music in Zimbabwe. The subjects within oppressive structures, similar to Zimbabwe, do not yield to power, but contest and express alternative identities. The task is to unpack how the dancehall music contest and express alternative views of reality. Constructive postmodernism acknowledges power structures, but unlike Foucault (1985:10), power is not institutionalised, pervasive and asymmetric. Power can be contested and new identities, instead of 'docile' bodies, can emerge (Hebdige 1979:10). Thus constructive postmodernity articulates 'new identities, communities and even utopias in the face of increasing ephemerality and social life that lacks foundation' (Thompson 1996:588). The approach 'seeks new connections and syntheses that might offer alternatives to the negative aspects of modernism' (Thompson 1996:588). It 'combines the benefits of modernity with values and qualities that it believes were devalued by modernism as an ideology' and 'represents new and often surprising combinations and crossovers of codes and discourses, but also challenges to grand narratives' (Thompson 1996:588).

Devoid of accountability over the legislature and executive, plausibly, dancehall music may be described as the genre of music that creates alternative spaces of survival outside the traditional institutions of the state and household. It reflects and creates a third space for alternative identities. For example in Winky D.'s (whose actual name is Wallace

Chirumiko) song *tiri masurovivor* (we are survivors), he narrates the insurmountable challenges from police brutality. Despite all the pain, he says the people have survived. Important to note is that the challenges are juxtaposed by episodes of happiness. From the song, plausibly, the celebrations act as an oasis of hope and courage, yet simultaneously, acting as a satire that mocks the political leaders who, through their maladministration, are accused of wishing their own people to suffer. In this regard, dancehall music expresses the identities of a generation that grows without the traditional institutions of a state and strong households.

Plausibly, given the collapse of national and family identities in Zimbabwe, dancehall music reflects the contextual ephemerality and the emerging alternative identities. I selected three dancehall musicians – Winky D., Tocky (whose actual name is Obey Makamure) and Killer T. (whose actual name is Kelvin Kusikwenyu) to illustrate this point.

Firstly, Winky D. is one of the top five dancehall musicians in Zimbabwe, whose music reflects the creativity of youth to survive during harsh economic conditions, celebrating their strides and their successes. Winky D. in his song *vashakabvu* (the departed), explains the socio-political changes that took place since the 1990s. He says:

Zvinhu zvachinja (rough there are serious changes)

Phone kugara muhomwe dzichi user mabatteries (we now have smart phones)

MaiChina avemuno ovhura mafactories (Chinese firms are many in Zimbabwe)

Pfekero yoita vasikana moshamisika (girls wear revealing clothes)

Mari yoshandiswa kuno ndeye kuAmerica (American currency is now used)

Zim dollar hakuna kana achamboiyuka (local currency is no more)

Pane Unity Government ndovimba makaudzwa (we now have two parties as government, I hope you were told)

The song is addressed to the ancestors and well-known figures who have died. In the song, the musician reports and updates the ancestors regarding the changes. Equally perplexed by the changes, he wants the departed to be surprised by the direction of the country.

Within this context of rapid change, through the song *survivor*, Winky D. describes the challenges associated with trying to eke out a living in the context of brutal reprisals from the city officials and the police.

Ndati ndizame chioconductor porisi ririkurova nemboma apa/ (wish to be a minibus conductor but the police are harassing people)

Ndironge musika panaCharter demon rekanzuru rabva rabata/ (wish to start a fruit market but the officials from council forbid)

Shinsoman the dancehall father ndabatwa/ (Shinsoman, I am locked in jail)

Biggy mucentral police ndavata/ (I spent a night in jail)

Zvakaoma kudaro, tiri masurvivor isu tiri masurvivor/ (despite the challenges, we are survivors)

Ende futi tine nharo tonenge magyver isu tinege MacGyver/ (we are determined because we are MacGyver)

Outstanding in the song is the description of the way the police brutalise the people. The song reflects the events after 2008 when industries closed and the youth could not find jobs. People tried to be entrepreneurs through starting transport and small markets. However, as the people fight for strategic places to sell their commodities, markets mushroomed everywhere including the city centre. As the song narrates, the city officials would fine and harass the people to leave certain areas. The song reflects the determination to survive against the steep odds. Winky D. describes the people as MacGyver, because of their creativity. The situation was dire, such that the people could have died in numbers, but miraculously survived despite the hardship.

Besides celebrating being alive, the song mocks the political leaders: similar to uncaring parents, the people have survived without their input. If people can survive without the state and household support, then in terms of identity, new spaces of identity have been created. The songs resonate with people who have survived under hard conditions by giving them courage. To capture this reality Winky D. further says:

Tariro handife ndakarasa/ (I will never lose hope)

Ndichangoramba ndichishingirira/ (I will persevere)

One day tichabudirira/ (one day I shall succeed)

Chirega kuchema kambani yekuti musodzi/ (stop crying)

Haifiyaka chovha ndima/ (nothing comes from crying)

The songs call upon people not to remorse and deject, a call made within a context where the state does not function. Instead of crying, new means of survival should be explored. Given that the collective national identity is torn, each person is responsible for their own survival. All the collective promises given after independence in 1980 have collapsed. However, importantly, despite the collapse of the nation and fragile households, Winky D. sings that people should not lose hope. In the song, Winky D. reflects a postmodern context where traditional institutions of family and nation are less relevant and the decisions regarding life are left to the individual who live in a very fragile context.

In the other song called 'Disappear', Winky D. sings, *maproblems ese disappear* (all problems have disappeared or are no more). This song needs a careful understanding because it reflects a person who is partying and happy within a gloomy context. One way to interpret the contradiction is from the perspective of psychology that laughter is a coping mechanism where people laugh at their own problems. Laughter lightens up the mood (Beck 2015). I prefer the constructive postmodern perspective of Kenneth Thompson (1996:588), which says that postmodern identities have a utopian element. Taking this perspective, the song *disappear* has a dual role of loosening up the mood and also igniting

a utopian vision where happiness is a permanent reality. This agrees with the motif of the song where Winky D. personifies happiness as a person who does not stay at one place. Upon meeting happiness, Winky D. begs and tells Happiness that he will not let them go. In a celebratory mood, he says that the present challenges are disregarded. In this regard, a utopian moment is where the present challenges are ignored or perceived to be absent to create an imagined alternative space of happiness. Thus Winky D. describes:

Gafa rafunga kuwachisa maproblem ese (wish to wash all my problems)

Tsvaga khuva malager macider mawhisky kunyange maseke (give me ciders, whisky and all kinds of beer)

Kana pane zviri kukunetsa huya tozvitapudza zvese (come let's remove all problems)

Tora sipi uone magic zvinoshamura zvese! (take a sip and all your problems will disappear)

Michel Foucault's (1977:330) notion of the heterotopia, which comes from the perspective of geography, may also be useful here. The heterotopia is an artificial imaginary space such as paradise or Garden of Eden, where the imaginary space is physically recreated: an in-between space that imitates the real, but should not be confused with reality. From an individual and collective perspective, heterotopian spaces respond to people's wishes by imitating their desires. This agrees with Freud's (1962:31) idea concerning the role of religion as narratives that appeals to our deep desires. Similarly, Winky D.'s songs may be understood as creating a heterotopia of happiness by people who live in a utopian vision which attempts to displace the real.

In other songs, *idya mari* (spend money) and *woshora* (you criticise), Winky D. seems to have given a different meaning to the paraded happiness. In this song, the people are invited to witness and envy his paraded happiness. Plausibly, as identity formation, his happiness is paraded to make the outsiders feel jealous. The people who should feel jealous are those who thought he might not achieve anything in life. These songs resonate with the youth who grew up in the context of a collapsed state and households, speaking to their pessimistic climate. Thus the songs may be political satire in that they implicitly cast the government as irresponsible, while people have made strides without assistance.

Secondly, Tocky whose real name is Obey Makamure, known for his poetic lyrics, is among the formidable voices in dancehall music in Zimbabwe. In summary, he uses dancehall music to encourage people to work hard and face life's challenges with hope. He reminds other youth that those who slack will harvest the fruits of their laziness, and also that help does not come from the government or family members. Using the metaphor of wilderness music, the individual should persevere in hope. Importantly Tocky regards his songs as conveying mature advice. Hence, in the song *ndini ndinorira* (am the one who makes the call) he calls upon all people to come and listen to his advice because

others give immature ideas. The song *toti toti* (tip-toe) best captures his message:

Inini ndaona vachimhanya mhanya todini nguva zwayakwana (I saw them running and scattered because time was up)

Mombe haikoreri pa market maivepi tinoti (you cannot achieve in one day, and we ask, 'where were you')

Zvino toita kufamba toti toti kufamba kwevakatsanya (take slow steps, like a person who is fasting)

In the song *toti toti* (tip-toe) he revises the philosophy to life from seeing life as linear and progressive, a process which is accompanied by material accumulation. Instead, he advises people that they should not lose hope when success does not happen instantly. *Kufamba toti-toti kwevakatsanya* means taking steady yet resilient steps. The song resonates with the youth whose opportune lives were disturbed by economic and political unrest within Zimbabwe. That one did not achieve goals at a particular age does not mean that life is hopeless; instead, being diligent is the measure of a successful life. Instead of seeking instant success, people should be patient because endurance, courage and persistence are better virtues compared to instant material accumulation. The motifs of endurance, patience and hope are ubiquitous in his songs. Similarly in the song *Usakande mapfumo pasi* (do not surrender the sword), Tocky advises people not to give up; instead, they should put on courage and soldier-on because, through persistence, they shall achieve their desires.

A critical question to Tocky's songs is, can endurance exist without substance? What is the purpose of diligence without a *telos*? In Tocky's songs, there is no prescription to success because the *telos* is illusive and, as Tocky sings, *hapana anoziva nzira* (no one knows the way), which captures the metaphor of the wilderness. Tocky sings about the illusiveness of achieving anything in the song *hope* (dream). The song is done in deep poetry, where in a dream, a man meets a beautiful yet crying girl who takes him to a burning house. The weeping yet beautiful lady may be a metaphor of the contradictions within the present life. On the surface life is beautiful because one is alive, yet painful because, to live, has to suffer. The purpose of living is to diligently suffer because success is not guaranteed. In the song, *Aenda nenyika* (has found fame) Tocky celebrates his successes and calls people to follow the path of persistence and courage, which seem to present a heterotopia that is also found in Winky D.'s music.

I argue that the motif of persistence reflects the situation in Zimbabwe after 2008 where, for the youth, there was no hope within the country. To revisit the metaphor of livelihoods within the wilderness, persistence captures the fragility of life which demands courage in the context of possible discouragement and surrender. The only motivation for living is courage and not material success, a message that resonates with a generation that has nothing to show for its prime age.

Thirdly, Killer T. (Kelvin Kusikwenyu) is equally a formidable dancehall musician in Zimbabwe. Most of his songs have

themes that overlap with Winky D. and Tocky. For example in his song *Zvese Zvandairota* (All that I dreamed of), he reflects the mismatch between his hopes and reality. The song reflects the ephemerality of the sociopolitical context. Because poverty is not anyone's desire, the song *Mundinzwevo* (Hear Me Out), advises against looking down upon those that are poor because there is not their making. The poor have been made into such a condition by the government. In many of his songs such as *Kufamba naro Bhora* (Moving with the ball), *vanoona Moto* (They will feel the heat) and/or *Hauptore* (You will never heal), the singer encourages people that, despite the challenges, they should remain hopeful and courageous.

## Conclusion

This study illustrates the way dancehall music creates alternative identities within a context characterised by hardships in Zimbabwe. It maps identities, theological motifs and provides commentary over the sociopolitical events that unfolded in the country. The genre of music differs from Chimurenga and ordinary gospel music in that it focuses on the individual. It captures the identities of the youth who grew without traditional institutions of the state and households. Throughout the study, the biblical metaphor of wilderness experience seems to dovetail with the experience of unfixed and alternative identities. Within such spaces, dancehall music is a vehicle for courage and hope, reminding the people that the present challenges are permanent. Hence courage and endurance replaces material success. A successful person is not the one who has material gain to parade; instead, it is the one who has endured till this far. Playing the role of counsellors, pastors and advisors, the dancehall musicians use poetry to make the message memorable. As endurance becomes tough, few episodes of happiness are exaggerated to provide an awkward heterotopia where the current pain is displaced by a flash of happiness. The scarce oasis of happiness stands visible as a reminder that through patience and persistence, Zimbabwe shall be a place of happiness. For now, dancehall music is the genre of music that offers hope and courage by making people focus on a hope in a context that has no shred of hope. At the moment, this is the kind of music that resonates with the majority of Zimbabweans, especially the youth.

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### Competing interests

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