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Cultural Crossings: Music, Visual Arts, and Performance in African Historical Change

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Introduction

This book begins from a simple but consequential claim: artistic expression does not merely mirror historical change in Africa; it frequently initiates, negotiates, and redirects it. By following the crossings among music, visual arts, and performance, we encounter the movements of people, ideas, technologies, and capital that have shaped African societies over centuries. Cultural Crossings names these entanglements—border crossings, genre crossings, and the everyday crossings between sacred and secular, rural and urban, local and global—that make art both a lens onto history and a lever within it.

Methodologically, the chapters that follow braid together archival research, close listening and looking, ethnographic encounters, and the study of objects, recordings, and repertoires. I pay attention to creative networks: the guilds and workshops that trained artisans, the studios and radio stations that crafted sound, the festivals and markets that circulated works, and the digital platforms that now recalibrate visibility and value. The book juxtaposes metropolitan centers and small towns, capitals and villages, to emphasize how innovations travel and how local practices anchor them.

The narrative arcs across time and region. We move from precolonial courts where music and regalia articulated sovereignty, to caravan routes that stitched the Sahel to the Mediterranean, to coastal worlds remade by the Atlantic and Indian Ocean trades. We examine colonial stages that disciplined bodies and displayed objects, then follow anti-colonial movements that turned song, mask, and mural into instruments of protest. Postcolonial futures—nation-building, apartheid and its aftermath, wars of independence and reconciliation—reveal how artists recalibrated identity and memory. Finally, we turn to the present, when streaming, social media, biennales, and mega-festivals amplify African creativity within global circuits while raising new questions about ownership and inequality.

Throughout, identity is not treated as a static inheritance but as an ongoing performance. Artists negotiate generational, gendered, and religious belongings; they craft publics through sound and image; they use satire, praise, spectacle, and silence as political acts. Economic histories are equally central: guild economies, markets and patronage, copyright regimes, and cultural policy shape what can be made, who can make it, and who benefits from its circulation. Attending to these infrastructures illuminates why certain styles flourish and others disappear, and how scarcity and ingenuity often co-produce aesthetic breakthroughs.

The case studies are deliberately wide-ranging. We listen for highlife in Accra's dancehalls and rumba in Kinshasa's bars; we follow praise poets across savannahs and

mask performers through forest clearings; we step into studios in Lagos and Johannesburg, workshops in Bamako and Kumasi, galleries in Dakar and Marrakech, theatres in Nairobi and Kampala. We trace textiles, hairstyles, and body arts as living archives of memory and fashion; we consider film, street art, and multimedia performance as arenas where citizenship and cosmopolitanism are rehearsed and contested. Diasporic circuits—Afro-Atlantic and Afro-Arab, Lusophone and Francophone, Anglophone and beyond—reveal how African creativity both absorbs and transforms global flows.

This is a nonfiction study aimed at readers interested in cultural history and creative networks, but it is also an invitation to think with artists about how societies change. Each chapter pairs thick description with historical framing, balancing specific scenes with broader arguments. While the book proceeds roughly chronologically, it encourages cross-reading: urban soundscapes converse with rural festivals; heritage debates resonate with digital futures; environmental extraction refracts through sculptural materials and sonic aesthetics. The aim is not to produce a single story of African art, but to map a set of crossings that show how art makes worlds—and remakes them.

CHAPTER ONE: Mapping Sound and Sight: Approaches to African Cultural History

To write about art in Africa is to enter a landscape where sound, image, and movement are not separate disciplines but interwoven languages. The beat of a drum, the curve of a textile pattern, and the arc of a dancer's leap can carry the same message, spoken simultaneously. Music is not only what you hear; visual arts are not only what you see; performance is not only what you watch. In many contexts, they are different facets of a single social act: the gathering of a community to remember, to heal, to celebrate, to contest, or to imagine new possibilities. This chapter lays out the ways scholars have tried to map these crossings, and the limits and promises of any map in such a varied continent.

Scholarship on African cultural history has often started with the search for origins. Early ethnographers and colonial administrators collected objects and songs with a taxonomic zeal, arranging them into typologies that sometimes said more about European categories than local meanings. They asked, "What is authentic?" and often assumed that art must be ancient to matter. Yet African artists have long made freshness from exchange, blending foreign materials and ideas with local forms. Instead of a purity model, it is more useful to see tradition as a living archive that grows through contact, adaptation, and reinterpretation. Art is a moving practice, not a museum label.

A useful first distinction is between art as artifact and art as event. A mask carved from wood may be stunning in a gallery case, but its power often resides in the moment it is worn, when sound, costume, and movement transform the wearer into a force of the community's story. A song recorded for radio may travel widely, yet its meaning can shift depending on the dance hall, the wedding, or the protest where it is played. Understanding this event-based quality helps avoid reducing cultural expressions to static objects. It insists that we listen for the situation and watch for the audience's role in completing the work.

African cultural history is also an oral history, but that phrase should not imply a lack of complexity. Oral traditions include poetry, praise singing, storytelling, and dialogue, performed with careful technique and remembered with mnemonic devices. They are not simply informal; they are rigorous systems of knowledge transmission, supported by instruments, gestures, and timing. The griot or jeli is not merely a storyteller but a historian, diplomat, and musician whose repertoire is both curated and improvisational. When we record oral performances, we capture only a slice of their life, because these forms are designed to respond to the moment, to the political

climate, and to the specific audience gathered on a particular day.

Objects, too, speak with layered voices. Textiles may record histories of trade, with indigo dyes from West Africa and cotton from the Nile, while beadwork can map migration routes and social status. Metalwork, pottery, and basketry are not simply decorative; they encode cosmologies and carry legal meanings. A stool may be a seat, a royal symbol, and a contract with ancestors all at once. To read such objects, scholars combine material analysis—studying pigments, fibers, and techniques—with ethnographic interviews and historical context, refusing the false choice between science and story.

Approaches to African sound have similarly evolved. Early collectors often transcribed songs as melodies, ignoring polyrhythms and call-and-response structures that define much African music. Later ethnomusicologists like Kwabena Nketia showed how rhythm is not merely a background but a carrier of social meaning, shaping the organization of labor, the staging of ritual, and the expression of emotion. Listening for "text" in lyrics is insufficient when the drum language in Ghana or the kalimba patterns in Central Africa can carry messages without words. The map of sound must include timbre, ensemble architecture, and the social rules governing who may play what, when, and for whom.

Performance studies bring another lens, focusing on embodiment and power. Across the continent, masquerades, initiation ceremonies, royal processions, and healing performances orchestrate bodies and objects in space. Scholars examine how choreography communicates authority, how costumes visualize transformation, and how audience participation shapes outcomes. A state procession is not only a display of power but a rehearsal of it, with music and regalia teaching citizens how to recognize authority and how to question it. Performance is a training ground for citizenship, and the stage—whether a court square or a village clearing—functions as a public sphere.

Historical methods, naturally, play a central role. Oral traditions are cross-referenced with written records where available, from Arabic chronicles in the Sahel to colonial archives and missionary letters. Archaeology adds depth, with excavations at sites like Great Zimbabwe or Dhar Tichitt revealing early artistic practices. Yet archives are uneven: they preserve some voices and erase others. Scholars now approach them as contested sources, noting who wrote, for what purpose, and under what power relations. The colonial archive, for instance, often documents art through a lens of control or curiosity; recovering African agency requires reading against the grain and supplementing with local testimonies.

Material culture studies have been particularly fruitful for tracing what objects reveal about mobility and value. Cowrie shells, once currency across wide regions, appear in art and adornment, marking economic histories. Iron slag at archaeological sites

signals early metallurgy and the prestige of blacksmiths. In the Sahel, salt and gold trade routes left traces in the pigments of murals and the geometry of textiles. These material threads let scholars map economic networks without relying solely on written trade logs. They also show how art both serves and symbolizes economic power—regalia legitimizes royal control of markets, for example.

Ethnographic fieldwork remains indispensable. Long-term immersion allows researchers to witness how artistic practice is taught, corrected, and remembered. Learning to play an instrument, participating in a dance, or assisting in a workshop yields insights that brief visits cannot. Ethnography also highlights the social life of aesthetics: who praises a song, who critiques a carving, who funds a festival. These micro-level observations provide texture to large historical narratives, reminding us that cultural change often begins in the small decisions of apprentices, performers, and patrons.

Interdisciplinary collaborations have expanded the toolkit. Historians partner with linguists to trace how terminology for art forms shifts over time. Archaeologists collaborate with conservators to stabilize fragile textiles. Ethnomusicologists work with computer scientists to analyze rhythm structures. Curators engage communities to co-curate exhibitions, challenging the museum's authority. These collaborations acknowledge that no single discipline can capture the fullness of African cultural history. They also democratize knowledge production, making research less about extraction and more about shared stewardship.

Digital methods now offer new ways to map sound and sight. Audio archives are being digitized and tagged for melodic motifs, rhythmic patterns, and languages. Photogrammetry enables detailed 3D models of sculptures and architecture, revealing construction techniques and wear patterns. Social media analytics track how songs and visual styles spread across borders, with hashtags marking the pulse of trends. Yet digital tools introduce new ethical questions: who owns digitized recordings, and who benefits when algorithms recommend African music to global audiences? The map must include these power dynamics and the infrastructures that mediate them.

Another critical approach centers on gendered dimensions of artistry. Women's contributions have often been under-documented, partly because certain instruments or performance spaces were restricted by custom. Yet across Africa, women have led dance societies, composed songs, and sustained textile traditions. The study of gender reveals how artistic expression both reinforces and challenges social hierarchies. It also highlights the labor of art: the hours spent weaving, the training of voices, the negotiation of performance rights. Recognizing this labor shifts the focus from charismatic creators to creative ecologies.

Religion and spirituality offer another axis for mapping. Indigenous cosmologies shape the symbolism of masks, the rhythm of rituals, and the placement of sacred objects.

Islam, particularly in the Sahel and Swahili coast, brought calligraphic art, devotional music, and architectural ornamentation that blended with local aesthetics. Christianity, especially through missions and Pentecostal churches, introduced choral traditions and visual iconography that were often Africanized. These faith traditions do not sit neatly side by side; they interact, producing hybrid forms and debates about authenticity, propriety, and power.

Urban-rural dynamics further complicate maps of art. The village festival, with its agricultural calendar and communal choreography, is not an older version of the city dancehall; they are different social ecosystems. Rural practices may be more embedded in ritual cycles, while urban styles are shaped by migration, radio, and market demands. Yet migration itself blurs these boundaries: a song composed in a city may be remade in a village, and a mask performance may travel to an urban stage. Rather than opposing the rural and the urban, we can trace circulations that make both.

Economic history is essential to understanding aesthetic choices. Patronage—royal, religious, or commercial—determines what art gets made and how it looks. The availability of materials, from bronze to imported beads, shapes technique and style. Copyright, piracy, and royalties affect whether artists can sustain their work. Cultural policy, from national festivals to ministry budgets, sets the stage for art's public role. The map must include markets, not just museums; the informal economy, not just formal institutions. Artists navigate scarcity and opportunity, often innovating under constraints.

The politics of display is another crucial terrain. Museums, exhibitions, and festivals have historically staged African art for outsiders, often stripping context and reinforcing stereotypes. Curatorial practices are now changing, with more African-led institutions and community partnerships. Yet repatriation debates reveal unresolved questions about ownership, restitution, and the ethics of keeping objects removed under colonial conditions. How art is displayed affects how it is understood, and maps of cultural history must include the institutions that frame public perception.

African art's global entanglements are long-standing. Trans-Saharan routes connected West African empires with Mediterranean markets. Indian Ocean networks linked Swahili towns to Arabia and South Asia. The Atlantic world reshaped aesthetics through the horrors and creativities of the slave trade and subsequent diasporas. Today, biennales, streaming platforms, and fashion weeks extend these exchanges. Rather than seeing globalization as a late modern imposition, it is more accurate to view it as a series of waves, each generating new crossings and new negotiations of value.

Methodologically, scholars increasingly avoid a single narrative of "African art" in favor of polyphonic accounts. Case studies become the building blocks: a specific drumming

style, a particular textile pattern, a local festival. These cases are not presented as emblematic of the entire continent, but as pieces of a larger mosaic. The approach honors local specificity while acknowledging interconnections. It also allows contradictions to stand: some communities emphasize preservation, others innovation; some artists seek global audiences, others root their work in hyperlocal contexts.

Language matters in this mapping. The term "art" is not universal; many languages use terms that emphasize craft, ritual, or performance rather than aesthetic autonomy. Translating concepts risks flattening meaning, yet it also opens dialogue. Scholars now prioritize local terminology alongside academic labels, keeping both in play. This practice resists the imposition of Western art history categories like "fine art" versus "craft" and acknowledges that boundaries are fluid. The map includes multiple lexicons, each revealing different horizons of value.

Time is another cartographic challenge. Historical change is rarely linear. Styles revive, disappear, and reappear; techniques are lost and rediscovered; forms migrate and return transformed. Calendars of ritual, harvest, and market often matter more than chronological dates. Scholars use timelines and maps, but they also use spirals and cycles to capture non-linear dynamics. The relationship between precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods is not a simple before-and-after; it is a layered palimpsest where each era leaves traces and erasures.

Ethics guide the methods. Research should not extract cultural knowledge for mere academic capital. Protocols of consent, benefit-sharing, and attribution are essential, especially when working with living artists and communities. Open-source archives and community-controlled databases can help. The map of cultural history must include questions of responsibility: who is accountable when art is recorded, exhibited, or commercialized? Ethical mapping makes room for silence—some knowledge is not for outsiders—and recognizes that access is a privilege, not a right.

A final methodological principle is humility. No single book or scholar can capture the full scope of African artistic life. The best we can do is draw partial maps, acknowledge our vantage points, and invite correction. This chapter's mapping is thus provisional, meant to equip readers with concepts and questions rather than definitive answers. It aims to spark curiosity and respect, the two habits of mind that make good travelers in cultural history. The chapters that follow will deepen and complicate this map with specific cases, letting places and practices speak.

Before moving to the historical chapters, it helps to notice how everyday aesthetics shape perception. Street vendors arrange produce as color compositions; barbershop signs make calligraphic statements; the geometry of a woven mat anchors domestic ritual. These are not minor arts; they are the baseline of visual literacy. They teach people to read lines, rhythms, and patterns, preparing them for more spectacular

performances. The mapping of sound and sight must include these ordinary forms, not as backdrop, but as the fabric of cultural life. They make the extraordinary legible.

As we turn to the long historical arcs ahead, keep in mind that the map will keep shifting. Kingdoms will rise and reform; sacred forms will travel; markets will reshape craft; caravans and coasts will mix aesthetics; colonial stages will discipline and resist; songs will rally movements; nations will paint themselves; cities will groove; villages will resonate; gender and faith will sculpt expression; media will revolutionize circulation; apartheid will fracture and mend; war will wound and heal; festivals and biennales will connect; informal cities will design themselves; youth will remix; screens will mediate; heritage will be contested; digital platforms will amplify; ecologies will challenge production; and futures will be negotiated. The thread is the crossing: art as a meeting point of bodies, objects, sounds, and ideas. That crossing is where history happens.

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