

3 CULTURAL CAPITAL

'More and more people are getting in touch with their African identity, especially the younger Gen Z. They are really into learning and discovery and I have so much hope in them. Personally, I want to tell actual Nigerian stories and I want to use our language to do it. In my screenplays I use Pidgin and local names and local languages. In the past I was often asked to change it but now that I'm doing my own work, I do it a lot.' Uyaiedu, 32

'The representation of books in Nigeria is not as culturally diverse as it should be. There are books written in Yoruba and other languages but when you walk into a bookstore you find mostly books written in English. There are some things you say that sound better in your mother tongue. I want to see more Nigerian books written in the traditional languages.' Oyindamola, 25

'African designers are beginning to express themselves; we are beginning to forge our own design style. I've seen people create a Danfo font, based on the yellow local buses that move around in Lagos. A friend in Zimbabwe has been looking at African patterns to discover the design language embedded in those patterns. It's really exciting.' Bolanle, 28

'Being an artist in Nigeria right now is great. I know a number of artists of my generation that are showing at art fairs outside the country. African artists, Nigerian artists are getting global attention. And it's not the older generation, it's the younger ones.' Osinachi, 30

'We are working on an animated TV series called Meet the Igwes. It is based on this part of the world, on Lagos. We find our story lines and ideas through word on the street, something catches our eye, or a rumour is making the rounds on social media. Many of the characters are based on people we know, especially supporting characters. I modelled one character after the way one of my neighbours talks. I studied the way he walks and talks, the way he sees the world. The background and story is ours but we can pull from people we meet.' Isaac, 30

'Five years ago, there was no one doing Nigerian cuisine. Every Nigerian chef would be doing French food or American food. It was foie gras this and caviar that. It was seen as giving you higher-level food. And then I came and said I'm not going to use any ingredient that we don't grow in Nigeria. And now people aren't making a differentiation anymore. Before, the catch of the day was downgraded on the menu and salmon, a fish we don't have close to our waters, was seen as better. Today, we have fish that is good and that's what we are serving. It's being driven by the younger generation. I think the younger generation are educating the older generation on how to approach our culture generally.' Michael, 32

Lagos has undergone a cultural transformation since the turn of the century. Driven by its vast youth population, its creative industries – from art and design to music, film and fashion – are booming. *Vogue* magazine hails Lagos as West Africa's cultural capital¹ and the *Financial Times* says: 'The city is home to a thriving music, fashion and film scene that reverberates around the continent.'²

Nigeria's media and entertainment industry stands to be one of its greatest exports. With a projected annual growth rate of 8.6 per cent, it is one of the fastest growing in the world.³ The country's film industry, Nollywood, was

worth US\$3.6 billion in 2016, and contributed 2.3 per cent, about 239 billion naira (US\$660 million), to GDP in 2021.⁴

But it is the music industry that is most indicative of how the Soro Soke generation, influenced by life in a vast megacity, is upending and disrupting perceptions of Nigerian culture. According to the Nigerian Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, the country's music industry will generate US\$86 million (3.09 billion naira) in revenue in 2021, making it the region's largest.⁵ In the past six years, a growing number of new production studios and artists have created a vibrant and self-sustaining industry and produced a string of world-class music that has won awards, fans and acclaim around the globe.

As Ikenna Emmanuel Onwuegbuna points out in his 2010 paper on African pop music, urbanisation has helped to create an entirely new sound.⁶ 'This new social order differs widely from former homogeneous ethnic settings', writes Onwuegbuna. 'And in expressing their musical artistry, urban dwellers, drawn from different ethnic backgrounds, are creating a syncretic urban neo-folk music.'⁷

The music emanating from Lagos epitomises Onwuegbuna's view of syncretic expression. Drawing from a variety of influences and embracing a mix of musical styles, young Nigerian musicians are combining R&B, hip-hop, dancehall and traditional sounds to create an entirely new sound known as Afrofusion.⁸ And rather than simply adapting global trends, they are embracing and amplifying their African identity.

Perhaps the most well-known proponents of the Afrofusion sound are Damini Ogulu, 31 (better known as Burna Boy), and Ayo Balogun, 32 (who performs as WizKid). On his 2011 debut album WizKid switches between English, Pidgin and Yoruba. Burna Boy incorporates languages such as Zulu and usually sings in a combination of Yoruba and English. Neither artist has diluted his Nigerian culture in a bid to appeal to a global audience, in fact, quite the opposite.



Figure 13 WizKid and Burna Boy perform at London's O2 stadium in December 2021

Source: Joseph Okpako/Getty Images

American rapper and producer Sean Combs, aka Diddy, calls Burna Boy's 2020 album *Twice as Tall* 'a modern but pure, unapologetic African body of work'.⁹

Ndeye Diagne is the West Africa managing director at consultancy and data analytics firm Kantar. In 2019, she headed up the company's Africa Life study, which surveyed 5,000 people in cities across six countries – Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon – with a follow-up survey of 3,500 across Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Senegal and South Africa in 2021.¹⁰ The process involved an hour-long, face-to-face questionnaire across a statistically robust and nationally representative sample with questions covering values, aspiration, lifestyle, media consumption, technological uptake and consumer confidence. The studies highlight that the growing confidence and pride in African identity expressed by musicians like Burna Boy is reflective of a generation.

‘This younger generation is very proud of their culture and all that comes with it’, says Diagne. ‘Pride and creativity in expressing their identity is a very big part of who they are. They create products that celebrate Africa, that use local elements, across music and fashion and more. They are determined to create a different future for Africa. To create an Africa that counts and that inspires the world.’

The Global North no longer resonates as the key tastemaker for this generation. They do not disregard it, but they do not prioritise it either. ‘This generation are citizens of a boundless world but feel deeply rooted in their African culture’, says Diagne. ‘There is a growing confidence and pride in Africa. They are not closing themselves off from the rest of the world, in fact they are very open and are very creative in the way they blend heritage with Western influences. But they are grounded in who they are and in their African identity.’

Burna Boy epitomises the confidence, vision and anger that fire the Soro Soke generation. Along with using local languages and local melodies, his lyrics address social issues and misperceptions of Africa. He has said he believes it is important for Africa to be heard and that his music ‘is building a bridge that leads every Black person in the world to come together’.¹¹ He talks often about the injustices of imperialism. ‘They don’t teach the right history, the history of strength and power that we originally had. They don’t really teach the truth about how we ended up in the situation we’re in’, he said in a *New York Times* interview.¹² When the 2020 Grammy Award for world music went to long-established Beninese singer Angélique Kidjo, she dedicated her trophy to Burna Boy, praising him for ‘changing the way our continent is perceived’.¹³

The success of Nigerian musicians also illustrates another important element of this generation’s cultural output: the direction of influence is now much more egalitarian. African musicians have had international success in

the past, the likes of Nigerian superstar Fela Kuti, Youssou N'Dour from Senegal and South African Miriam Makeba. But they were individual success stories and wider African musical genres had limited global impact. That has changed.

Burna Boy's *Twice as Tall* was nominated for the Best World Music Album at the Grammys, amassed over 11.4 million streams in the US in its first week and debuted at number 1 on Billboard's World Music Charts.¹⁴ WizKid's 2021 London O2 arena tour of *Made in Lagos* sold out in minutes and his song 'Essence' became the first African song to go platinum in the US, where it sold more than one million copies. WizKid has collaborated with North American stars including Drake and Justin Bieber. Beyoncé is a Burna Boy fan, and he has also collaborated with British stars such as Sam Smith and Stormzy.

'In the past we were proud of our culture, but it was not so visibly expressed', says Diagne. 'All the power lay with the West, so Africanity was a bit suppressed. The difference today is that young people are more open and vocal about African identity, and it is seen as positive and exciting. In fact, now the Western world is tapping into it.'

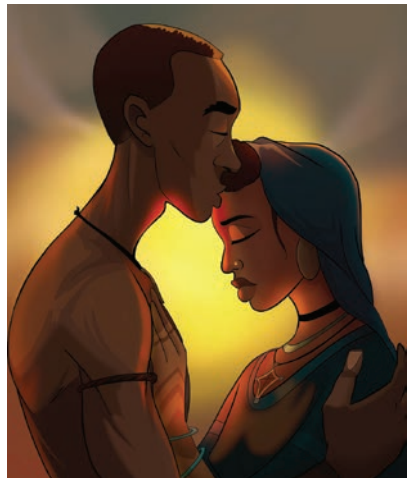
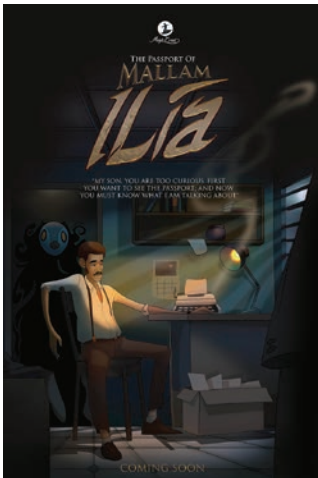
This confidence and pride in local culture is a theme that extends beyond the music industry. Uyaiedu Ipke-Etim, 32, is a Lagos-based writer and film-maker who explores the use of local language in her work. 'Pidgin is often seen as a lower-class language', she says. 'At school we were punished for speaking Pidgin. It's a remnant of colonialism that you should speak the Queen's English. I say a big fuck you to that. We speak more flavourfully, and Pidgin expresses that.'

Chekwube Okonkwo, 29, and Isaac Matui, 30, are part of the young creative team that heads up Magic Carpet Studios, which creates animated films and television series – a first feature film, *The Passport of Mallam Ilia*, is currently in production. The studio is committed to exploring African

stories in its work and this first film is an adaptation of a young adult Nigerian novel that is set in the country's Muslim north.

'There is something unique about northern Nigerian culture; it is so rich and so deep that we wanted to explore it artistically', says Okonkwo, the studio's co-founder and lead art director.

In adapting the work, Okonkwo and Matui, the studio's head of story, discovered and embraced a cultural difference in storytelling. 'Most animated films are about the happy ever after, show business type endings – people want to have a good time in the cinema. But I think we are just beginning to understand that if we want to tell African stories and tell them authentically, we have to be true about it', says Okonkwo. 'Our stories dive into the cause and effects of things. We don't really care about the plot – it's more about the moral of the story. This is typical to



Figures 14 and 15 Promotional poster and still from Magic Carpet's first feature film, *The Passport of Mallam Ilia*

Credit: Chekwube Okonkwo, co-founder and art director at Magic Carpet Studios

most African stories. How the character ends up, whatever quest she embarks on, it's all tied into that. I grew up with my father telling me stories, under the moonlight on our balcony. Some stories, I couldn't understand at the time but as you get older you get the gist of it. With our stories, kids grow to understanding.'

The challenge for some young artists and designers, now, lies in debunking Western myths and stereotypes around African culture. Speaking to *Vogue* magazine, Omoyemi Akerele, who launched Lagos Fashion Week, said: 'Sometimes there's a question if the aesthetic is not obviously African. If you don't see the print, you don't see the pattern, you don't see the embellishments. The question you get is, "Oh, is this an African brand?" It's about trying to tell them, "Listen, this designer might have a pared-down, almost minimalist influence, but that doesn't make them less African."' ¹⁵

Okonkwo concurs with the sentiment. 'Sometimes you see animators and artists trying to Africanise their work. It might be set in the present day, but they put some beads or a calabash to make it African. But then it feels like Africa is becoming foreign to Africans. It becomes like a fictional world, a Wakanda-like world.'

This is not the way Magic Carpet works. The studio has big ambitions, but Matui is clear that it does not care to measure itself against studios in the West. 'We are not the Disney of Africa, we are the Magic Carpet of Africa', he says. 'We don't have to be under the shadow of anything. They started from somewhere and we are starting from somewhere too. At the end of the day, we want to build something here.'

To a very large degree, the Soro Soke generation has no truck with playing to Western narratives. This young cohort is finding its voice, identity and freedom in sincerity of expression.

‘My generation has been dealt a very bad card economically; we’ve been forced to look within, to find this aspect of cultural awareness, identity awareness’, says 32-year-old chef Michael Elégbèdé. ‘We own who we are and how we express ourselves. I think we are finally understanding that ownership of our identity is freedom. We are demanding the freedom that we deserve. And part of that freedom is expressing our culture and who we are, in a way that is true to us.’