

Rewriting Fatherhood in Shona Popular Music: Ethical and Emotional Labour in Alick Macheso's Baba VaSandy

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Abstract

This article examines Alick Macheso's Shona song Baba VaSandy as a site for negotiating, critiquing, and reimagining fatherhood in contemporary Zimbabwe. Drawing on multivocal ethnomusicological frameworks and critical masculinity scholarship, the study analyses the song's lyrical narrative alongside its digital reception. This qualitative study uses verse-by-verse textual analysis and thematic interpretation of YouTube comments to trace public engagement and moral reflection. The analysis highlights five interrelated dimensions: children as moral witnesses to paternal failure; the temporal and ritual politics of arrival; the intergenerational consequences of neglect framed through *dzinza* (lineage); the affective and somatic imprint of domestic conflict; and the de-commodification of care, in which love (*rudo*) is enacted through presence, attentiveness, and relational labour rather than material provision. The study integrates African philosophical and Southern African ethnomusicological perspectives to demonstrate how Baba VaSandy functions as a moral pedagogy, offering culturally grounded tools for evaluating, critiquing, and reshaping masculinities. The study contributes to literature on African fatherhood, popular music as ethical practice, and the role of digital media in mediating social discourse, showing that popular songs can generate public moral reflection and advance alternative forms of paternal authority.

Keywords: Shona, Popular music, Fatherhood, Masculinity, Ethics of care, Digital media

1 Introduction

Between 1993 and 1999, I attended Takunda Primary School in Mkoba, a former Group B government school that mostly served children from low-income households. Schools like Takunda were visibly different from City Council and corporate-run institutions such as Takwirira or Bata Primary. It was common for pupils at Takunda to be sent home for unpaid fees or incomplete uniforms, a daily reminder of the economic struggles many families faced. Yet even within this sea of hardship, our classrooms were not homogeneous. A few children came from comparatively better-off families, while others performed small acts of self-fashioning to mask their economic backgrounds.

One incident from Grade 5 stands out. A classmate whom I will call Corlo had written in an English composition that his father was a medical doctor at Gweru General Hospital. Our teacher asked him to confirm the story, her disbelief revealing more than I understood at the time. Corlo's father was in fact a general hand. Corlo had been too ashamed to write his father's real occupation, and the truth was betrayed by the simple details we all recognised: an incomplete uniform, worn-out shoes, and the quiet embarrassment that surrounded many of us.

I, too, crafted a more dignified paternal identity when required. I would write that my father worked for ZIMNAT Life as a Senior Financial Advisor, a position actually held by my uncle, who happened to share his initials. When friends visited our home, the ZIMNAT calendar bearing "my father's" name reinforced the illusion. The discomfort underlying these fictions had little to do with our fathers themselves; it stemmed

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from the social pressure to measure fatherhood through income and occupation. Poverty made our fathers appear inadequate.

As an adult and a father, I now recognise how narrow that childhood conception was. My father may not have been a high-earning professional, but he offered nurturing care in abundance. With more resources, he would likely have fulfilled the provider role with ease. What I once viewed as failure was in fact a reflection of the structural conditions that limited many Zimbabwean men's ability to embody the conventional ideal of the provider-father.

This early experience reflects a larger social reality. Fatherhood in Zimbabwe occupies a complex social, cultural, and economic terrain in which traditional expectations, structural constraints, and shifting family forms intersect (Musiwa et al., 2026). Historically, fatherhood has been defined through the roles of authority, discipline and economic provision, positions deeply rooted in patriarchal kinship systems and reinforced through customary norms that cast men as heads of households (Bhana et al., 2026). In many communities, a "good" father is one who fulfils his provider obligations even if this comes with emotional distance or limited everyday engagement with children. This model has remained remarkably resilient despite profound social change, shaping public perceptions of what men ought to do within families and determining how paternal success is evaluated.

Contemporary realities complicate the above mentioned ideal. Economic instability, unemployment, labour migration, and evolving gender expectations have transformed the lived experience of fatherhood in Zimbabwe. Many men struggle to perform the provider role in the ways tradition prescribes, leading to feelings of inadequacy, withdrawal, or diminished involvement in family life (Mogano et al., 2025). Others are physically present but emotionally absent, maintaining a distant patriarchal authority that restricts everyday relational intimacy with their partners and children. These dynamics have fuelled public concerns about "present-but-absent" fathers, paternal silence, and the intergenerational consequences of authoritarian or disengaged fatherhood.

At the same time, there is growing recognition of the importance of paternal involvement in children's emotional and social well-being. Research across Southern Africa shows that fathers significantly contribute to children's cognitive development, educational outcomes, and emotional security, regardless of co-residency (Lobaka, 2022; Makusha & Richter, 2014). However, despite the clear developmental value of nurturing fatherhood, the cultural scripts available to Zimbabwean men remain narrow. Dominant constructions of masculinity continue to equate fatherhood with wage labour and financial responsibility, marginalising emotional presence, affection, and everyday nurturing labour as feminine or secondary responsibilities. This mismatch between cultural expectations, economic realities and children's developmental needs reproduces a persistent tension: Fathers are expected to care, yet they are not socially equipped or encouraged to practise care.

This tension creates fertile ground for cultural intervention particularly through popular music, which has long served in Zimbabwe as a medium for social commentary, moral reflection, and everyday pedagogy. Within this context, Alick Macheso's widely celebrated song *Baba VaSandy* becomes an indispensable cultural text. Macheso, Zimbabwe's foremost sungura musician, commands a unique cultural authority; his music, rooted in the rhythms of Zimbabwean traditional genres and styles, has long served as a vernacular for reflecting the everyday moral and material concerns of Zimbabwean life (Chamisa, 2022). Macheso's voice carries the weight of public trust, transforming popular song into social commentary with broad pedagogical reach (Chamisa, 2023; Matiza-Mtombeni, 2022). Rather than reinforcing the familiar figure of the distant or purely economic father, Macheso articulates a form of nurturing fatherhood that values presence, accountability, and relational care. Its widespread popularity evident in continual airplay, social media circulation, and adoption into everyday family conversations signals a public resonance with this alternative script, and yet scholarship has largely overlooked its cultural significance.

This article examines *Baba VaSandy* as a culturally significant site through which I explore how popular music might open space for alternative masculinities in Zimbabwe. I am motivated by the limited cultural scripts available to men who wish to practise nurturing fatherhood and by the paucity of scholarly attention to music's role in shaping these possibilities. By analysing the song's lyrical framing of fatherly responsibility alongside its public reception, I seek to understand how Macheso's work engages with,

questions, or unsettles prevailing expectations of paternal authority and emotional restraint. In doing so, I aim to contribute to broader debates on masculinity, caregiving, and the pedagogical functions of popular music, and to consider whether Baba VaSandy gestures toward a more relational and emotionally engaged model of fatherhood within contemporary Zimbabwe.

2 Theoretical framework

This study is situated at the intersection of masculinity studies, African ethnomusicology, and scholarship on public pedagogy. It draws on this interdisciplinary constellation to analyse Baba VaSandy as a cultural site in which competing ideas of fatherhood, emotionality and male responsibility are negotiated, performed, and pedagogically reshaped.

2.1 *Masculinity and fatherhood in African contexts*

Fatherhood is shaped by broader configurations of masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful starting point for understanding dominant expectations placed on Zimbabwean men, particularly the expectation to exercise authority, provide materially, and maintain emotional restraint. Yet, as Morrell and Ouzgane (2005) argue, African masculinities are neither monolithic nor static; they are historically layered, culturally specific, and continually reworked in response to social and economic conditions. Within this framework, nurturing or emotionally expressive fatherhood does not necessarily represent a Western imposition, but can be read as part of a wider repertoire of African paternal practices that have been overshadowed by colonial legacies, labour migration, and economic precarity.

Complementing this is scholarship on hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014), which examines how men selectively incorporate practices such as caregiving while retaining or reconfiguring patriarchal authority. This concept helps to frame Macheso's lyrical portrayal of fatherhood as both a challenge to and a negotiation with conventional gendered expectations. The song's attention to presence, emotional visibility, and mutual respect positions paternal care not only as a moral duty but as a relational practice grounded in everyday interactions within the household.

2.2 *Popular music as social text and public pedagogy*

The study is further anchored in theoretical work that understands popular music as a mode of public pedagogy; a cultural form through which social meanings are produced, circulated, and contested. It follows the tradition set by Barber (1997), who conceptualises popular arts as public arenas of debate or public sphere where society reflects upon itself. Ethnomusicological scholarship (Mutero, 2018c; Turino, 2008) has long argued that African popular music functions as an arena for moral debate, political commentary, and social reflection. Drawing on Hall (2001) encoding/decoding model, the song is treated as a text that encodes particular interpretations of fatherhood while audience responses, such as those expressed in YouTube comments, constitute the decoding practices through which these meanings are affirmed, challenged, or extended.

By bringing these perspectives into conversation, this analysis examines how Baba VaSandy encodes a form of hybrid masculinity that simultaneously draws from and critiques hegemonic norms, and how it circulates as public pedagogy through digital reception. This integrated framework allows us to treat the song not merely as a musical artefact, but as a dynamic social text, one where masculinities are performed and debated, emotional norms are made visible, and cultural understandings of fatherhood are pedagogically reshaped. This lens supports an analysis attuned not only to lyrical content, but to the wider social, affective, and moral work that popular music performs in contemporary Zimbabwe.

3 Methods

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative design that combines ethnomusicological multivocal thick description with elements of digital ethnography. According to Titon (2012), multivocal thick description is an interpretive methodology used to apprehend and interpret cultural "texts" by unpacking the layers of symbolic meaning embedded within social actions and musical expressions. In this framework, a song is treated not merely as a technical object of analysis or a "text" to be decoded scientifically, but as a "social text" that reflects lived experience, identity, and cultural symbols (Titon, 2012).

The analysis proceeds in two interconnected stages. First, the lyrical narrative of Baba VaSandy is examined using close reading techniques grounded in ethnomusicology and African popular music studies (Barber, 1997). This step involves identifying recurring motifs, moral framings, and representations of paternal behaviour and emotional labour within the song. Second, the study analyses public reception through comments posted on the song's most viewed YouTube video. Here, the affordances of the digital platform are integral to the method.

YouTube functions not only as a contemporary cultural forum but as an archival and algorithmic system that reshapes the song's pedagogical function. Unlike ephemeral radio play, it provides a permanent, on-demand archive. The anonymity of the comment section can enable more confessional discourse, while algorithmic recommendations recirculate the song within broader networks of social and moral content (Hine, 2020; Kozinets, 2015). Following netnographic principles, YouTube comments were thus treated as naturally occurring data that offer insight into how listeners interpret and mobilize the song within this specific digital ecosystem.

To ensure methodological transparency and avoid selective sampling, a clear set of inclusion criteria was developed. All comments posted between 2019 and 2024 were retrieved and sorted by relevance, with the first 200 populated comments subjected to analysis. Spam, duplicated comments, emoji-only posts, and off-topic remarks were excluded. The remaining comments were coded inductively using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step thematic analysis. The analysis approached comments as discursive performances situated within the affordances and vernacular conventions of the YouTube platform rather than treating them as transparent expressions of intent. This enabled the identification of dominant interpretive patterns, affective registers, and recurring cultural frames, including humour, irony, and exaggeration as analytically significant modes of meaning-making rather than methodological limitations. My positionality as a Zimbabwean ethnomusicologist informed the interpretive lens while maintaining analytic reflexivity. This positionality functioned to explicate tacit (nontextual) knowledge (Tracy, 2010), allowing for culturally grounded and nuanced interpretation of both the music and comments from YouTube. The goal of this qualitative design is to illuminate how meaning circulates through both the musical text and its digital reception, thereby demonstrating how Baba VaSandy becomes a site for negotiating paternal norms in contemporary Zimbabwe.

4 Results and discussion: Reading Baba VaSandy as a multivocal social text

Applying Jeff Todd Titon's framework of multivocal description to Alick Macheso's Baba VaSandy, understood both as a lyrical narrative and as a digitally mediated cultural artefact, reveals the song as a key site where Zimbabwean fatherhood is publicly negotiated, contested, and reimagined. Rather than approaching the song as a closed musical object, (Askew, 2002; I. T. Mutero, 2018).

The discussion unfolds across two interrelated domains. First, it examines the lyrical semiotics through which Macheso mobilises familiar Shona symbols to unsettle hegemonic paternal authority. Second, it situates these lyrical interventions within their multivocal reception on YouTube, where listeners extend, personalise, and sometimes confess through Macheso's narrative. Together, these layers illuminate how Baba VaSandy operates as a form of public pedagogy around care, masculinity and moral responsibility, one that resonates strongly within contemporary debates on fatherhood in Southern Africa (Ratele, 2016; Richter & Morrell, 2006).

4.1 *Children as moral subjects and the exposure of paternal failure*

Verse 1: Alick Macheso

The opening verse of *Baba VaSandy* establishes the song's ethical orientation by centring children as moral subjects rather than passive dependents. Macheso directly confronts the father, *nhai baba vaSandy munodarirei pamberi pevana* (Father of Sandy, why do you act/behave like that in front of the children?), posing a question that is less inquisitive than accusatory. The question and by extension the verse works to foreground the spatial and moral visibility of paternal conduct thus framing fatherhood as a practice that is continuously observed, evaluated, and judged within the domestic sphere, thereby alerting the audience's attention not just to inappropriate behaviour, but to the fact that it unfolds in front of children.

Crucially, Macheso rejects a common patriarchal assumption, that children are either oblivious to adult conflict or too immature to interpret it. His insistence that *vana vanoziva musiyano wekufara nekusuwa* ("The children know the difference between happiness and sadness") asserts children's emotional literacy and moral discernment. Children, in this formulation, are not shielded innocents but perceptive witnesses who can distinguish joy from sorrow and, by implication, care from neglect. In addition, the repeated refrain *vana vanoti kudiiko nazvo* ("the children ask, what is this?") functions as a chorus of ethical indictment. Rather than articulating anger or rebellion, the children voice confusion which is itself politically and morally significant.

In African expressive traditions, repetition is not redundancy but emphasis; it amplifies moral urgency and invites communal reflection (Agawu, 2014; Nketia, 1974). Through returning insistently to the children's question, Macheso transforms private domestic disturbance into a public moral problem, rendering paternal failure audible and socially discussable. This positioning challenges dominant masculinity frameworks in which adult male authority is insulated from scrutiny by age hierarchies and emotional silence. Much scholarship on African masculinities has prioritised men's struggles to achieve respectability under conditions of economic and social constraint, sometimes at the expense of those who bear the consequences of masculine failure (Morrell, 2001). Macheso's intervention disrupts this analytic emphasis by shifting attention to children as evaluators of masculine conduct. In doing so, *Baba VaSandy* resonates with more recent work that treats children as social actors whose emotional responses constitute a form of moral commentary on adult behaviour (Hardecker et al., 2016). Macheso's choice to ventriloquise children's voices does not diminish adult responsibility; rather, it intensifies it. The father's actions no longer belong to the private realm of marital conflict but are exposed as failures with social, emotional, and intergenerational consequences.

What Macheso does is significant because it situates popular music as a form of everyday moral pedagogy. As scholars of African popular music have long argued, musicians often act as social commentators who translate intimate experiences into shared ethical frameworks (Barber, 1997; Turino, 2008). Song is thus understood as a socially authorised medium through which otherwise marginalised voices, children, women and subordinates, can speak moral truths indirectly (I. Mutero, 2018). The functional role of music thus becomes both a representation of emotion and performance of ethical disclosure. Macheso lays the groundwork for a broader critique of masculinities that rely on silence, fear, or assumed dominance by granting children narrative voice and moral standing.

4.2 *Temporal absence, deception, and the moral politics of homecoming*

Verse 2: Alick Macheso

The second verse of *Baba VaSandy* deepens the song's ethical critique by shifting attention from exposure to temporality. Here, Macheso interrogates not only what the father does, but when and how he appears within the domestic space. The father's repeated late arrival, rationalised through claims of work, becomes a moral problem rather than a logistical one. The pointed question *kubasaiko kwamunouya isu vamwe tatorara* ("What kind of work is it where you come home only after the rest of us are already asleep?") destabilises the dominant patriarchal narrative in which labour justifies absence. Scholarship on African fatherhood has long documented how histories of migrant labour and economic dispossession have normalised male absence while preserving symbolic authority within the household (Hunter, 2015; Morrell, 2001).

Macheso scrutinises the way work is mobilised discursively to mask withdrawal, deception, and emotional non-participation. He frames lateness as a relational failure rather than an economic sacrifice, by emphasising that the father arrives when “the rest of us are already asleep”. As such, time becomes ethical substance where arrival after sleep is not neutral. Instead, it signifies avoidance, secrecy, and a refusal of encounter. This temporal failure culminates in one of the song’s most powerful sonic inversions: the household responds to the father’s arrival with *maihowee vauya* (Oh no, he’s back), a cry of alarm rather than welcome.

In Shona domestic life, *vauya baba* (“here comes the father”) conventionally signals safety, order, and restored authority. Macheso fractures this deeply embedded script, transforming the father’s presence into a source of fear. This inversion is crucial. As Agawu (2014) argues, African musical meaning often emerges through the manipulation of expectation. Macheso exploits a familiar auditory cue only to subvert it, making fear audible where comfort should reside. This resonated with my own childhood understanding of paternal inadequacy, which was also framed through economic lack. Where I once internalized shame for my father’s modest job, Macheso’s lyrics expose a more insidious failure: the use of “work” as a shield for emotional neglect. Both revelations, however, stem from the same oppressive logic that reduces fatherhood to a transactional, economically defined role devoid of nurturing care.

The repeated confessions: *tavakanganisa, pfungwa toga toga* (“we have failed them; their minds are scattered/disturbed”) register the affective fallout of this distorted homecoming. Although voiced collectively, the disorientation is clearly traced to paternal deception. Authority here is revealed as performative rather than relational. Macheso thus aligns with critical masculinity scholarship that shows how hegemonic masculinities sustain themselves through appearances of control that conceal emotional disengagement (Ratele, 2016). The home, far from being stabilised by paternal arrival, becomes a space of anxiety where the father’s arrival is met with screaming *maihowee vauya*, precisely because authority is no longer anchored in care.

4.3 Moral education, communal witness, and the crisis of dzinza

Verse 3: Alick Macheso

The third verse widens the moral horizon of Baba VaSandy, extending the consequences of paternal failure beyond the household into the intergenerational and cosmological order. Macheso’s question *chidzidzoiko chavachadzidza kubva kwatiri?* (“What kind of lesson will they learn from us?”) reframes fatherhood as a pedagogical relationship. Children are not only witnesses to behaviour; they are learners whose moral worlds are being actively shaped by what they observe. This framing resonates with African philosophical traditions that understand socialisation as moral apprenticeship rather than abstract instruction (Chitakure, 2022; Taringa & Chirongoma, 2023).

Macheso intensifies this argument through the warning that such children may grow up to be described as having no ancestral roots: *pavanozodero zvonzi vana ava hapana dzinza*. (“When they imitate us, people will exclaim: ‘These children have no proper upbringing/heritage’.”). In Shona cosmology, *dzinza* (clan/lineage) is not reducible to biological descent. It is a moral and spiritual infrastructure linking the living to ancestors and future generations (Bourdillon, 1976; Matiure, 2011). To lack ancestry is to be socially unanchored and spiritually vulnerable. Macheso reframes fatherhood as custodial responsibility rather than personal entitlement by connecting paternal neglect to the erosion of clan lineage. The father’s failure is both emotional and threatens the continuity of moral personhood itself.

Anthropological work on kinship in Southern Africa has emphasised that lineage is sustained not only through naming and ritual, but through everyday practices of care, discipline, and presence (Mshayisa et al., 2024; Mthethwa, 2025). Macheso’s intervention aligns with this scholarship by showing how emotional abandonment produces symbolic orphanhood even in the presence of a living father. The song thus challenges masculinities that claim ancestral legitimacy while undermining the very relational labour through which lineage is reproduced. Significantly, Macheso stages this crisis as a communal concern. Grandmothers and relatives are brought in the chorus of bewilderment, repeatedly asking *veukama vanoti kudiiko nazvo?* (“What will the relatives say about it?”). Failing to provide positive fatherhood is no longer an

individual failure but a public moral rupture. This multivocality reflects a broader African musical logic in which ethical judgement is dispersed across collective voices rather than monopolised by a single narrator (Barber, 1997). Through repetition and escalation, the song transforms domestic neglect into a socially accountable problem, demanding recognition from the wider kinship network.

4.4 *Silence, somatic distress, and the reconstruction of nurturing presence*

Verse 4: Alick Macheso

Verse 4 marks a pivotal shift in Baba VaSandy, moving from critique toward reconstruction. Macheso begins by insisting that some things should not be said or done in front of children: *Zvimwe hazvibvire kurevaaaa, (Pamberi pevana); Zvimwe hazvibvire kutaura, (Tavapariraka)* ("Some things cannot be said openly, (in front of the children); Some things cannot be spoken about, (we try to shield them from it)"). This refrain is not an appeal to silence for its own sake, but a demand for ethical restraint with a view to protect adult reputation and children's emotional integrity. Macheso underscores the moral obligation of adults to manage conflict responsibly rather than displacing its weight onto children through repetition of this warning. Across disciplines, research strongly implies that adults have a moral responsibility to manage conflict in ways that protect children rather than shifting its emotional burden onto them (Nangia, 2023; Sudland & Neumann, 2020). Rather than treating moral responsibility as an empirically provable fact, this analysis understands it as a socially produced norm communicated and reinforced through musical performance.

The verse then returns to the consequences of domestic strife, tracing its effects on the child's body and social life. The child becomes withdrawn at home and visibly sad at school (*Bopoto pamba rinoita kuti mhuri ishungurudzike, Chero kuchikoro unomuona nekusuwa*) (Conflict at home causes the family to be distressed; even at school, you can see them [children] looking sad). Drawing on Sara Ahmed's affect theory, we can read this "*kusuwa*" (sadness) as an example of how emotions stick to subjects through repetition and proximity (Ahmed, 2013). The domestic tension does not remain at home; instead, the child's body becomes a "bodily archive" of the father's conduct. As the child moves from the home to the school, the sadness circulates with them, transforming a private domestic conflict into a visible public affect. This somatic distress demonstrates that fatherhood is not just a social status but a practice that "orients" children toward particular emotional states.

When Sandy is "visibly sad at school", her body is performing a "multivocal" critique of her father's neglect, a silence that speaks more loudly than the father's deceptive excuses. By framing the child's body as a site of moral witness, Macheso challenges the patriarchal "culture of silence". He challenges the assumption that domestic conflict can be contained within private space. Instead, Macheso renders trauma as somatic and mobile, carried into classrooms, friendships, and public life. This aligns with anthropological work on affect that emphasises how emotions circulate socially rather than remaining privately owned (Ahmed, 2013). Silence here is not absence of speech; it is a bodily archive of harm.

Against this bleak landscape, Macheso introduces a counterfactual vision of fatherhood organised around time, ritual, and attentiveness: *Sandy naye anofara kugashira baba vabve kubasa, (Vasvikaa nguva dziripo)* Sandy rejoices to greet her father returning from work, (when he comes home on time). *Vauya vauya babaaaa, vauya baba ohhhh vauya vauya, (zvihwitsi muhomwe)* (He's here, he's here — father has come home! (with sweets in his pocket)).

The father who arrives on time while the child is awake embodies an alternative masculine ethic. Time, previously a marker of avoidance, becomes a moral resource. The act of *kugashira baba* (receiving the father) is framed as a relational ritual through which authority is confirmed by eagerness rather than fear. In addition, the objects the father brings, sweets, newspapers, small treats, are not incidental embellishments. Macheso introduces a counterfactual vision of fatherhood organised around time, ritual, and attentiveness. The father who arrives on time while the child is awake embodies an alternative masculine ethic. Time, previously a marker of avoidance, becomes a moral resource. The shift is captured in the jubilant, repeated chant that rewrites the domestic soundscape:

In African expressive traditions, material symbols often condense moral meaning (Mdhuli, 2025). Here they signify remembrance, communication, and shared pleasure. The newspaper links the father

to knowledge and conversation rather than noise and conflict; the sweets and treats register intentional tenderness. Through these details, Macheso reconstructs fatherhood as something enacted through ordinary gestures rather than dramatic authority. This reconstruction demonstrates how popular song can function as what Turino (2008) calls a socially meaningful process, a shared script for feeling and action that listeners can recognise and inhabit. The repeated chant “*vauya vauya baba*”, once associated with fear, is reclaimed as celebration. The emotional soundscape of the home is rewritten where authority is no longer imposed but is welcomed.

4.5 De-commodifying fatherhood and reclaiming loving and nurturing care

Verse 5: Alick Macheso

The song’s closing movement crystallises its ethical intervention through a decisive separation of provision from care: *Mari tingavapa zvedu harusi rudo, mari tingavapa zvedu harusi rudo; Zvitsvene tingavapa zvedu rudo rwuhombe, zvitsvene tingavapa zvedu rudo rwuhombe (asi)* (“We may give them money, but that is not love; giving them money alone is not love. What we must give them is something sacred — our great love, our deepest love (but. . .)”). Macheso insists that money, while necessary, does not constitute love. In a Zimbabwean context historically shaped by migrant labour, economic precarity and colonial disruptions to family life, this distinction is profoundly destabilising. Much scholarship on African fatherhood has shown how masculinity has been anchored in the capacity to provide materially, often rendering emotional absence socially intelligible or morally excusable (Hunter, 2015; Morrell, 2001). Macheso does not dismiss provision; rather, he relativizes it. He exposes the thinness of a paternal model that reduces responsibility to remittances and symbolic authority by declaring that money alone is not love.

In Macheso’s formulation, love is redefined as presence, affirmation, and emotional labour. His repeated insistence that children should know they have parents, ought to be certain that both father and mother are present, frames love as relational certainty rather than material security. This resonates with feminist ethics of care that conceptualise care not as affective disposition but as sustained practice involving time, attentiveness, and accountability (Hooks, 2004). Read through this lens, Baba VaSandy articulates fatherhood as an embodied obligation that cannot be outsourced or deferred. Love is not something that circulates indirectly through money; it is enacted through everyday presence.

Financial provision is often associated with hegemonic masculinity, where traditional masculine performance remains entangled with wage labour and financial provision (Helman et al., 2019), standing in the way of fathers being proactive primary caregivers. Typically, simple family interactions like playing, singing, and reading with young children are not perceived as important aspects of child care by some Black African men (Gibbs et al., 2017). Through song Macheso engages communities in negotiating hegemonic masculinity and the traditional conception of men as financial providers with a view to improve positive fatherhood. Positive fatherhood is crucial in ensuring that children thrive, not just survive (Makusha & Richter, 2018). It lays the foundation for good health, rapid brain growth (Allen et al., 2015), optimum human capital, and subsequent success in adult life (Allen et al., 2015).

Through foregrounding emotional availability as a core paternal duty, Macheso challenges a dominant masculine logic in Southern Africa in which economic contribution is mobilised to compensate for emotional withdrawal. As Ratele (2016) argues, such logics sustain masculinities that are socially powerful but ethically thin, privileging authority over care. Baba VaSandy intervenes in this terrain by offering an alternative moral grammar of fatherhood; one in which legitimacy is grounded in responsiveness rather than distance, and authority is earned through relational labour rather than assumed through provision.

5 Audience meaning-making and the social life of Baba VaSandy

The lyrical analysis reveals Baba VaSandy as a carefully encoded text of moral pedagogy. Yet, its cultural significance is ultimately determined by its public uptake and resonance. To understand how this alternative script of fatherhood circulates and gains social traction, we should move from textual encoding to audience decoding.

The digital reception on YouTube provides a dynamic, multi-vocal record of this process, functioning as a contemporary public forum where the song's lessons are validated, negotiated, and integrated into everyday moral reasoning. Across comments, the song is taken up as a moral reference point through which fatherhood, masculinity, care, and domestic harm are publicly evaluated. These digital conversations reveal how popular music participates in shaping social understandings of fatherhood by offering shared symbols, language, and affective cues that listeners mobilise in relation to their own lives. By analysing this reception, we will see how listeners transform the song into a shared cultural tool using it to draw moral boundaries, confess personal trauma, critique materialist masculinity, and collectively imagine a more empathetic paternal authority.

5.1 *Baba VaSandy as moral caution and masculine boundary*

A recurring pattern in the YouTube comments is the transformation of Baba VaSandy into a moral shorthand for failed fatherhood. Listeners invoke the character not merely as a narrative figure, but as a negative reference point against which they actively position themselves. Statements such as *Ndikasazongoitawo baba va Sandy* ("I hope I don't become like Baba Sandy") reveal how the song enables moral self-fashioning, allowing men to articulate what they refuse to become. This process aligns with scholarship on masculinity as relational and performative rather than fixed, in which men continually negotiate acceptable masculine identities in relation to culturally available figures and scripts (Connell, 2020; Hatendi, 2024).

What is significant here is that this moral boundary-making occurs in a context where paternal authority is often normalised even when it is emotionally harmful. Macheso's song renders damaging forms of fatherhood visible and discussable by naming Baba VaSandy as a recognisable figure of fear, neglect, and emotional absence. This resonates with African fatherhood studies that have shown how cultural respect for male authority can coexist with silence around emotional harm (Makusha, 2024; Richter & Morrell, 2006). The song provides a culturally legitimate proxy through which critique can be voiced without directly confronting elders, kinship hierarchies, or entrenched gender norms. In this way, music becomes a mediating device for negotiating alternative masculinities, displacing critique onto a shared aesthetic figure while preserving social cohesion (de Boise, 2012).

5.2 *Lyrical language as moral resource*

Another dominant theme in the comments is the circulation of Macheso's lyrical phrases as moral resources, most notably *Mari tingavapa zvedu harusi rudo* ("Giving them money is not love"). When listeners reproduce this line in the comment space, they are not simply quoting the song for the sake of it; they are mobilising its language to critique materialist definitions of fatherhood that prioritise financial provision while excusing emotional withdrawal. This directly engages debates within fatherhood literature that distinguish between provider masculinity and caregiving masculinity, particularly in contexts of economic precarity where breadwinning is often overemphasised (Richter & Morrell, 2006).

The portability of this phrase suggests that Baba VaSandy has contributed a durable moral vocabulary to everyday discourse. Ethnomusicological work has long argued that song lyrics can function as "social texts" that circulate beyond performance contexts, shaping moral reasoning and everyday talk (Barber, 1997; Turino, 2008). Here, Macheso's lyrics become tools for judgement and reflection, allowing listeners to name dissatisfaction with dominant fatherhood norms in culturally resonant terms. The repeated quotation of Macheso's lyrics in the comment space also reflects a process of entextualisation, whereby elements of a performed song are rendered into detachable, circulating texts that listeners mobilise as moral resources or perhaps socially actionable discourse (Barber, 2005).

5.3 *Music as a space for disclosure and affective witnessing*

Perhaps the most consequential audience responses are those in which listeners use the song as a point of entry to disclose personal experiences of family breakdown, neglect, and abuse. Comments such as *"Masong edu vane vabereki vakaparadzana"* ("This song is for those of us from broken homes") position

Baba VaSandy as a collective site of recognition for shared histories of paternal absence and domestic conflict. These disclosures align with scholarship on music as an affective and social infrastructure, one that enables recognition, emotional articulation, and forms of witnessing that may be unavailable in formal public spheres (DeNora, 1999, 2000).

More starkly, some commenters use the space to speak about ongoing emotional abuse and gender-based violence, as in the comment: *in love with this song cz boyfriend yangu inondishungurudza and I'm pregnant*. While individually these are personal testimonies, collectively they reveal how the song legitimises speech about harm that is often silenced by norms of endurance, respectability, and family privacy. Silencing abuse in families is a dominant part of Shona culture, with the proverb *chakafukidza dzimba matenga* implying that the secrets of the home need to remain untold being used to legitimise abuse as expected and a norm in families (Manyonganise, 2015).

The culture of silence gives abusive fathers room to continue with their wayward behaviour realising that there are no immediate consequences and that the public would never know about it. However, by repeatedly foregrounding the effects of paternal behaviour in the refrain *pamberi pevana* ("in front of the children"), Macheso's lyrics reframe domestic cruelty as a public moral issue rather than a private matter. This echoes feminist and public health scholarship that emphasises the social normalisation of domestic violence and the difficulty of naming it within patriarchal family structures (Mathews et al., 2015). The song thus represents suffering as well as creates conditions under which suffering can be acknowledged, shared, and morally evaluated.

5.4 Empathy and the reimagining of masculine authority

A further theme emerging from the comments is listeners' recognition of Macheso's empathic narrative stance. Several respondents explicitly note that the song's power lies in the fact that it is voiced by a man who inhabits the emotional worlds of women and children. One comment observes that Macheso is a fellow male who we all respect stepping into a woman's shoes and singing passionately from a woman's heart." This response is culturally significant in a context where masculine authority is often associated with emotional restraint, stoicism, and distance.

Rather than being interpreted as weakness, Macheso's empathic positioning is read as moral strength. This resonates with critical masculinity scholarship that argues for the ethical and political importance of care, vulnerability, and emotional openness as alternative masculine virtues (Ratele, 2016). Through this empathic orientation, Baba VaSandy reframes paternal authority as something earned through attentiveness and presence rather than assumed through gender, age, or economic role. Audience responses suggest that this reframing resonates across gendered and generational lines, contributing to a wider moral community that values emotionally engaged fatherhood.

6 Conclusion

This article extends existing scholarship on African fatherhood and masculinity by demonstrating how popular music functions not merely as a reflective medium, but as an active cultural mechanism through which alternative paternal ideals are articulated, circulated, and normalised. While much work on fatherhood in Southern Africa has focused on social policy, labour migration, or ethnographic accounts of family life (Morrell & Ouzgane, 2005; Richter & Morrell, 2006), this study shows how music supplies the affective language, symbolic cues, and moral scripts through which fatherhood is publicly debated and emotionally apprehended. Baba VaSandy operates as a form of public pedagogy: It renders harmful forms of masculinity visible, legitimises emotional critique, and offers listeners a culturally resonant vocabulary for imagining nurturing paternal presence. By foregrounding multi-vocal audience engagement in digital spaces, the article further demonstrates that musical meaning is co-produced through listening, repetition, and response.

The YouTube comment space extends the song's social life, enabling listeners to reflect on personal experience, articulate moral judgement, and imagine alternative paternal futures. This aligns with ethnomusicological and cultural studies scholarship that positions music as a site of informal learning,

moral reasoning, and social instruction (Giroux, 2004; Turino, 2008). In this sense, Macheso's song does not simply comment on fatherhood; it actively participates in reshaping the moral commons within which fatherhood in contemporary Zimbabwe is understood and evaluated. Rather than prescribing behaviour, the song works by shaping affect, language, and recognition. It renders certain forms of fatherhood visible as harmful while making nurturing presence intelligible and desirable. In doing so, Baba VaSandy illustrates how popular music can intervene in intimate social domains, offering culturally grounded resources for thinking about care, responsibility, and what it means to be a father in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest or competing interests associated with this research.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from publicly accessible online sources. These data were derived from publicly available YouTube comment threads accessible at the time of data collection. Any personally identifiable user information has been removed or anonymised in line with ethical research practice.

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