

Governmentality and Development Issues in Zimbabwe: A Decolonial Reading of Selected *Dendera* Songs by Simon Chimbetu

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Abstract

Music functions as a vital communicative tool, engaging with and reflecting upon social, cultural, economic, and political realities. This article interrogates how *Sungura* music articulates the intricate interplay between governance and development in Zimbabwe through the works of prominent artist Simon Chimbetu. By deploying critical discourse, content, and textual analyses, this qualitative study examines four selected *Dendera* tracks to reveal how music operates not merely as entertainment but as a medium for social commentary, critique, and dialogue on pressing national concerns. The paper addresses a significant gap in scholarship by demonstrating how *Dendera* music serves as a vehicle for political and social discourse that both shapes public perceptions and influences community development. The findings show that Chimbetu's lyrics address the theme of governmentality, manifested in economic hardship, food insecurity, unemployment, transport inefficiencies, and social injustice. His music thus provides a narrative that resonates with the lived struggles of ordinary Zimbabweans, positioning him as a cultural voice for the marginalised and as an interpreter of Zimbabwe's contested developmental trajectory. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader debates on the role of popular culture in advancing critical citizenship, amplifying subaltern voices, and shaping the discourse on sustainable governance and development in postcolonial African contexts.

Keywords: Governance, *Dendera*, Development, Popular music, *Sungura*

1 Introduction

Music has long served as a critical medium of expression and resistance in Africa, functioning not only as entertainment but also as a vehicle for social commentary and political engagement (Nketia, 1986). From liberation songs that mobilised independence movements to contemporary protest music that amplifies marginalised voices, musical traditions across the continent have been deeply entwined with struggles for justice, governance reform, and development (Bayart, 2009). In Zimbabwe, this role has been particularly pronounced in the *Sungura* genre, a fast-paced and widely popular musical style known for its rhythmic intensity and lyrical depth (Muranda & Maguraushe, 2014). *Sungura* artists such as Leonard Zhakata, Tongai Moyo, Hosea Chipanga, and Simon Chimbetu have consistently engaged with pressing socio-political themes in their music (Gwerevende, 2022; Ncube, 2022). By embedding lived experiences into relatable narratives, *Sungura* has emerged as a critical site for both preserving cultural identity and interrogating political realities.

Within this context, Simon Chimbetu's distinctive *Dendera* music occupies a central position in Zimbabwe's cultural and political landscape. *Dendera*, a sub-genre of *Sungura*, named after the Shona word for the hornbill bird, became Chimbetu's artistic brand and a platform through which he articulates the struggles, aspirations, and frustrations of ordinary Zimbabweans. His lyrics, rich in metaphor and symbolism, address enduring challenges such as poverty, unemployment, corruption and social injustice, situating

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them within broader questions of governance and development (Gwindingwe & Osunkunle, 2022; Pfukwa, 2019). While scholars such as Vambe (2004), Maganga et al. (2015) and Maguraushe (2024) have explored Chimbetu's contributions to debates on culture, land reform, liberation struggles and Pan-Africanism, less attention has been paid to his sustained engagement with governance and development discourses. This paper addresses that gap by analysing selected *Dendera* songs, demonstrating how Chimbetu's music both reflects and critiques Zimbabwe's governance crisis, while amplifying the voices of the subaltern in a postcolonial state.

The aim of this article is to examine how Simon Chimbetu expresses governance and development issues in Zimbabwe through his selected songs. The article proceeds in three parts. The first section examines music as a medium of grievance articulation and resistance against misgovernance. The second analyses selected songs by Chimbetu, focusing on their embedded commentaries on governance and development. The final section reflects on the implications of these insights for understanding Zimbabwe's governance trajectory. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that Chimbetu's *Dendera* music not only documents the historical struggles of the Zimbabwean populace but also contributes to diagnosing the enduring governance crisis. In elevating subaltern voices through popular culture, his music reaffirms the role of art in shaping political consciousness and fostering critical engagement with questions of justice, development, and nationhood.

2 Popular music as subaltern journalism and a postcolonial critique of socio-political issues in Africa

Music continues to play an integral role in the political and social development of societies (Gwerevende et al., 2026). Popular music is a site where ordinary citizens critique, align with, and express aspirations about governance and development outside formal political channels (Bayart, 2009). In the African context, music functions as a potent form of popular culture, addressing the struggles of the majority and amplifying their socio-political concerns (Ncube, 2022). Artists in Africa have consistently used their platforms to expose bad governance (Gwerevende, 2023; Gwerevende & Matiure, 2022). Protest songs have functioned as a form of 'people's journalism' (Mano, 2007), articulating grievances and mobilising public consciousness. Gwerevende et al. (2026) explore the role of music as a tool to fight for democracy, and to peddle views on governance, politics and elections. Protest music has oscillated between celebratory and critical registers, simultaneously affirming cultural identity and contesting political authority. Popular music has become a sonic register of "domestic despondency" (Maguraushe et al., 2022), resonating with younger Zimbabweans navigating precarity.

African countries, including Zimbabwe, have grappled with chronic economic crises marked by hyperinflation, an unsustainable debt burden, sanctions and protracted political instability, compounded by what Bräutigam and Knack (2004) identified as Africa's pervasive crisis of governance: weak institutions, fragile leadership, and corruption. These governance failures manifest in persistent policy challenges, including limited access to healthcare, food insecurity, unemployment, climate vulnerability, economic instability, and housing shortages (Poshai et al., 2024). Corruption, in particular, has eroded public trust and diverted resources away from urgent development needs, with high-profile cases such as that of former Health Minister Obadiah Moyo, implicated in a fraudulent US\$ 60 million procurement of COVID-19 medical supplies, reinforcing citizens' disillusionment (Gwerevende, 2022). In response, Zimbabwean musicians deploy their art as a platform to denounce corruption, gaining national traction as their protest songs expose the ubiquity of graft. In this context, popular musicians have emerged as cultural actors advocating for justice and accountability. Their work aligns with continental visions such as the African Union's Agenda 2063, which underscores culture as a driver for a prosperous, peaceful, and just Africa (Gebrihet et al., 2025).

Reports by the South African Institute of International Affairs (South African Institute of International Affairs, 2021) and the International Crisis Group (International Crisis Group, 2016) emphasise the severity of Zimbabwe's long-standing economic crises, characterised by hyperinflation, unemployment, debt, policy inconsistency, and infrastructural decline. Such realities are embedded in musical discourse, with

comments on state failures. At the turn of the millennium political and economic conditions deteriorated and popular musicians openly critiqued governance, thereby both articulating and amplifying popular discontent (Gukurume, 2025; Tivenga, 2018; Vambe, 2004). The relationship between music performance, development and governance issues is undeniable (Gwerevende, 2022). Through intricate melodies and relatable storytelling, popular songs resonate with listeners' experiences with politicians, providing both entertainment and insight. The narratives within these songs highlight the challenges faced by citizens in a rapidly changing environment, revealing the complexities of governance in a country marked by economic hardships and political unrest. Popular music not only preserves cultural heritage but also encourages discourse around pressing issues, making it a crucial part of Africa's socio-political fabric.

Several post-independence scholars have blamed African crises on African leaders' corruption, greed, gluttonous accumulation of wealth, and bad governance. Scholars have frequently attributed the crisis to internal factors such as corruption, patronage, and poor governance (Chitando, 2002; Makumbe, 2009; Muwati et al., 2013, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Raftopoulos & Mlambo, 2009). However, Chirombe (2019) contends that such perspectives are often parochial, overlooking external contributing dynamics, including sanctions and global economic pressures. Few studies have examined the protracted nature of the crisis from the late 1990s into the post-2017 era, nor have they considered how cultural production, particularly music, mediates popular understandings of governance. This study addresses that gap by analysing Chimbetu's *Dendera* music as a form of agency in tackling governance challenges. His repertoire demonstrates how popular music functions as 'music as journalism' (Mano, 2007), producing narratives that transcend temporal boundaries while engaging enduring governance themes.

3 Sungura music a sonic archive of postcolonial crisis and elite betrayal in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean popular music encompasses a diverse repertoire, ranging from traditional forms such as *Sungura*, Chimurenga, *mbira* and *jiti* to hybridised contemporary genres that draw on hip-hop, reggae, and pop (Gwerevende, 2022, 2023). Popular music has played a significant and multifaceted role during periods of crisis in Zimbabwe, serving as a medium of expression, critique, and cultural resilience. Vambe (2004) highlights how themes of governance and development have been central to popular music in the post-independence era, situating art as a critical site for political and social reflection. Throughout Zimbabwe's turbulent history, marked by political upheaval, economic instability and social unrest, *Sungura* music has provided both solace and a powerful platform for commentary.

Scholars such as Kwaramba (1997), Eyre (2001) and Mhiripiri (2011) define *Sungura* music based on its instrumentation and its East African regional genealogy (Kenyan and Tanzanian Benga/rumba traditions). *Sungura* is a vibrant and widely consumed genre in Zimbabwe, characterised by its fast-paced rhythms, intricate melodies, instrumental richness and localised lyrical content (Muranda & Maguraushe, 2014). Perman (2012, p. 397) noted that "*Sungura* is constructive and expressive of local lives and identities that have emerged through very specific political and economic circumstances." Chirombe (2019) says that *Sungura* artists have foregrounded the corrosive effects of cronyism and corruption, linking them to broader governance failures. Chipanga's post-2000 reflections on the land question, for instance, frame Zimbabweans as betrayed by the ruling party's leadership. Within this tradition, artists such as Leonard Dembo, Cephas Mashakada, Tongai Moyo, Hosea Chipanga, Leonard Zhakata, and Simon Chimbetu have consistently engaged with political themes, embedding within their lyrics pointed critiques of governance and development failures. These artists have popularised the genre. This reflects the country's ongoing cultural dialogue, and the enduring role of music as storytelling, social critique, and cultural pride.

Within this broader *Sungura* tradition, Simon Chimbetu's *Dendera* occupies a complex position: While echoing popular concerns about economic and social injustice, his work often articulated them in ways that aligned with or cautiously supported the ruling party, thereby embodying the ambiguities and compromises inherent in Zimbabwe's protest music tradition. Ambivalence is characteristic of musicians like Chimbetu who vacillated between support for the ruling ZANU PF party and opposition to its authoritarian ways. The reason for this ambivalence is that the ruling party originated as a revolutionary movement before it installed

itself in government, where it produced disappointing results. Chimbetu himself was a revolutionary at heart, who first supported Mugabe's party but later became critical of it when the political realities changed and the musician responded to the change in the nature of the ruling party.

4 Who is Simon Chimbetu and why his music?

Simon Chimbetu (23 September 1955–14 August 2005) remains one of Zimbabwe's most celebrated and award-winning musicians whose ingenuity established a cultural brand with enduring resonance in Zimbabwe and the wider Southern African region. At the height of his career, Chimbetu filled stadiums, and his lyrics continue to appeal to successive generations of listeners who regard his music as both essential and reflective of their lived experiences. Chirere (2015), however, observed that Chimbetu's career was also marred by controversy, including media demonisation, show boycotts, and overt hostility from some citizens who were feeling the impact of the economic meltdown. Nevertheless, his repertoire remains vital for understanding the intersection of music, politics, and governance in Zimbabwe. In this article we argue that Chimbetu sang about political issues as they affected Zimbabweans despite his political affiliation with ZANU PF. His music transcends time and space and historical boundaries.

Central to this study are Chimbetu's *Dendera* songs, which poignantly capture Zimbabwe's socio-political landscape. The term *Dendera*, derived from the Shona word for the hornbill bird, was appropriated by Chimbetu to brand his style of *Sungura* music. Chimbetu named his brand of *Sungura Dendera* because the bass guitar sound on his songs is a sonic mimicry of this tropical bird's deep, booming, bass call. His bass guitar sound is complemented and harmonised by the rhythm and sub rhythm guitars. His songs not only preserve cultural heritage but also interrogate systemic injustices, tackling themes such as corruption, poverty, and inequality. Through rich storytelling and evocative performance, Chimbetu's music reflects the lived struggles and aspirations of ordinary Zimbabweans, positioning itself as both entertainment and social critique (Gwerevende, 2023).

Chimbetu's music, in particular, provides critical insight into Zimbabwe's postcolonial trajectory. Scholars have examined his engagement with cultural identity (Pfukwa, 2010), land reform (Maguraushe, 2024; Pfukwa, 2019), the liberation struggle (Maganga et al., 2015), and Pan-Africanism (Vambe, 2004). Gwindingwe and Osunkunle (2022) further highlight the apocalyptic and political dimensions of *Dendera* music, showing how tracks like *Sawara* warned of the dangers of false promises during the land redistribution programme. By examining Chimbetu's work, one can gain a clearer understanding of how art can influence societal change and reflect the collective consciousness of a nation grappling with its identity and future. *Dendera* music, therefore, also influences governance and stands as more than just an entertainment genre; it embodies the spirit of resilience and the quest for better governance and development in Zimbabwe.

Despite the growing body of scholarship, Chimbetu's articulation of governance and development themes remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by interpreting Chimbetu's music as a cultural text that voices the concerns of the subaltern, situating his work within the broader critique of Zimbabwe's governance crisis. Following Quijano (2007)'s notion of the *colonial matrix of power*, the paper argues that Chimbetu's songs articulate postcolonial struggles of survival, unemployment, and disempowerment. His compositions, such as *Vana vaye* (Those Children), *Magobo* (Stumps), *Lullaby*, and *Ndaremerwa* (I Am Overwhelmed), give voice to citizens navigating systemic economic collapse. These narratives speak to the historical moment of the late 1990s, a period marked by worsening economic conditions and culminating in the birth of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999. Although Chimbetu passed away in 2005, his critique of corruption, poverty, unemployment, and transport crises resonates with contemporary realities.

The governance and development challenges experienced in Zimbabwe can be linked to the binary relationship between the subaltern and ruling elite characterised by what Aníbal Quijano (2007) referred to as the 'colonial matrix of power'. The working-class problems of survival, unemployment, and economic collapse that are nuanced in Chimbetu's song lyrics are typically post-colonial and post-imperial. The music speaks on behalf of the subaltern through his expression of everyday life experiences (Maggio, 2007). Therefore, we argue that Chimbetu uses *Dendera* music to speak on behalf of the subaltern through the

songs *Vana vaye* (those children), *Magobo* (Stumps), Lullaby and *Ndaremerwa*. Chimbetu assumes the voice of the citizens who struggle to eke out a living in a very difficult economic environment. The paper adds to the analysis of the theme of governance and development in Zimbabwe from the late 1990s to the present as gauged through some of Simon Chimbetu's *Dendera* music compositions. The economic woes experienced in the country are captured in Chimbetu's 1997 album, and these challenges culminated in the birth of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) party in 1999. Chimbetu's songs invaluabley contribute to understanding historical struggles and offer a contribution to the diagnosis of the contemporary governance crisis in Zimbabwe.

Despite this enduring popularity, scholarly engagement with Chimbetu's work has been limited. This paper, therefore, argues that Chimbetu consistently addressed political and governance issues in his music, regardless of political affiliation or historical epoch. From a governance perspective, his contribution is especially significant. As both an artist and a cultural worker he influenced, and was influenced by, the cultural and political milieu of Zimbabwe (Chitando, 2002). His songs provide an important lens for examining how governance is interpreted, experienced, and represented through popular music. Chimbetu's significance lies partly in his dual identity as a self-confirmed ZANU PF member and a liberation fighter, which enabled him to articulate political issues in Zimbabwe's anticolonial struggle. His narratives both affirmed ruling party discourses and highlighted the stark realities of poverty and inequality in Zimbabwe. His music reflects the struggles of ordinary citizens, employed and unemployed alike, and functions as historically conscious art. Marongedze (2019) notes that Chimbetu was consistent in composing songs that responded to specific socio-historical contexts, thereby offering cultural texts through which governance issues can be critically interrogated.

5 Performance, postcoloniality and governmentality as theoretical underpinnings

The paper is framed by the intersecting theories of performance, postcoloniality, and governmentality, which together provide a productive lens for interrogating the dynamics of power, culture, and governance in contemporary Zimbabwe. Performance, in this paper, is conceived not only in its theatrical sense and potential to convey meaning (Cohen, 2012), but also as the enactment of identities, the contestation of oppression, and the negotiation of societal expectations. Performance is an inclusive concept that spans the ritualisation of animals (including humans), everyday social interactions, professional roles, play, music, sport, theatre, dance, and large-scale ceremonies (Schechner, 1977, p. 78). Schechner's influential theory offers useful insights into the analysis of popular music performance, in this case *Dendera*. Performativity, closely tied to postmodern thought, positions performance not as an isolated artistic practice but as a phenomenon deeply embedded within political, social, and material realities (Gwerevende, 2022). Chimbetu's music exemplifies this entanglement, engaging directly with Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political landscape. In this sense, *Dendera* transcends Eurocentric understandings of music as mere aesthetic expression, emerging instead as a performative practice that intervenes in debates on governance, justice, and development.

Postcoloniality provides a further interpretive framework, enabling an exploration of the lingering effects of colonialism on cultural identities, social structures, and power relations (Radhakrishnan, 1993). It highlights the ways in which historical narratives continue to shape contemporary struggles over nationhood, democracy, and belonging. Zimbabwe's postcolonial experience is marked by the continual wrestling between nationalist discourses and democratic aspirations. Perman (2012) characterises the social formations around *Sungura* as subaltern, drawing on Gramsci's notion of a group yet to attain full consciousness of its strength or potential (Gramsci, 2000, p. 210).

Within this subaltern context, Chimbetu's *Dendera* music reflects the socio-economic crises of postcolonial Zimbabwe, offering a space for the articulation of new social identities forged in struggle and hardship. Perman (2012, p. 397) notes that *Sungura* emerges as an expressive response to postcolonial turmoil, giving cultural form to collective experiences of dislocation and resilience. Chimbetu's music thus functions as both a cross-cultural expression and a site of postcolonial critique. Postcolonial theory,

originally rooted in literary studies, provides a framework for understanding how artists in formerly colonised contexts negotiate identity, resist domination, and reinterpret culture (Klein, 2004; Mishra & Hodge, 1991). While its uptake in ethnomusicology has been uneven, postcolonialism nonetheless illuminates the political and cultural dimensions of artistic production, highlighting how *Dendera* music both reflects and resists Zimbabwe's postcolonial condition.

Governmentality (Foucault, 1991) extends this analysis by interrogating the diffuse ways in which power is exercised through societal norms, institutions, and practices that regulate behaviour and shape subjectivities. Governance, in this sense, is not confined to formal state structures but encompasses cultural and discursive practices. Effective governance is premised on listening to citizens' voices, fostering fairness, dignity, trust and harmony, principles also embedded within the African humanist philosophy of *ubuntu/unhu*. *Ubuntu* foregrounds shared humanity, solidarity, and communal accountability as essential to rebuilding societies fractured by injustice (Molefe, 2019). Within this framework, Chimbetu's *Dendera* music can be interpreted as a cultural intervention in governance debates, articulating demands for justice, dignity and equitable resource allocation. His performances metaphorically reflect on *matongerwo enyika* ('a country's governance and political life'), thereby imbuing the music with political weight and positioning it as a vehicle for human rights advocacy and social transformation.

Analysing Chimbetu's oeuvre, thus, reveals how popular music mediates understandings of governance in Zimbabwe. As both a cultural worker and a producer of meaning, Chimbetu shaped and was shaped by the socio-political context in which his music circulated. His songs provide historically conscious commentaries that respond to shifting political landscapes, thereby constituting an archive of Zimbabwe's governance crises. Marongedze (2019) similarly observes that Chimbetu consistently composed music that directly engaged with the socio-historical moment. While Zimbabwe's crises have been extensively studied across disciplines, including economics, history, media, and political science (Chitando, 2002; Makumbe, 2009; Muwati et al., 2013, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Raftopoulos & Mlambo, 2009), analyses have often privileged elite political and economic explanations, neglecting cultural interventions such as popular music. This study seeks to fill that lacuna by adopting an applied ethnomusicological approach, demonstrating how *Dendera* functions as a form of cultural agency in addressing governance challenges. Moreover, it shows that Chimbetu's music operates as a form of "music as journalism" (Mano, 2007), producing narratives that transcend specific epochs and continue to resonate with Zimbabwe's enduring struggles over governance and development.

Taken together, performance theory, postcoloniality, and governmentality form a multi-faceted lens to gauge the nexus of power and citizens' gross domestic vicissitudes. The communal experience of melodies turns commuter blues and unemployment into shared, cathartic public expressions as audiences to "perform" resistance and solidarity through song and dance, not direct confrontation. Situated within the postcolony, these grievances are read as residual elements of colonial economic structures that Zimbabwe's ruling elite reproduced rather than dismantled, hence Chimbetu's lyrics critique the betrayal of liberation war promises. Governmentality illuminates how the state exercises overt force, the public transport system, the labour market and economic policies. Neglect is seen to cruelly shape ordinary life. These frameworks simultaneously show Chimbetu's music as an artistic performance, postcolonial critique, and a revelation of governmental mechanisms that produce and normalize citizens' suffering.

6 Linguistic ethnomusicology and lyrical analysis

This research adopted a qualitative approach to explore the governance issues linked to the economic difficulties in Zimbabwe, as portrayed through selected *Dendera* song lyrics by Chimbetu. The study is framed explicitly within the context of linguistic and semiotic ethnomusicology, drawing from song analysis, secondary sources, and the researchers' experiences of the social, economic, and political landscape in Zimbabwe. Chimbetu's *Dendera* song lyrics were analysed using critical and textual discourse analysis. The study posits that music functions as a form of symbolic discourse which, when interpreted, reveals multiple meanings (Gwerevende, 2022). Critical discourse analysis prompts us to view language in music not as detached but as meaningful within a specific social, political, and historical framework (McGregor,

2010). Textual analysis seeks to comprehend language, symbols, and imagery within musical texts to understand how individuals interpret and convey their lives and experiences (Hawkins, 2017).

While ethnomusicologists widely agree that ‘music is a universal language’, it also poses challenges that could lead to misunderstandings, prompting several significant inquiries (Beaster-Jones, 2019). For instance, how does music convey or signify meaning? What do we mean when one states that music expresses an idea or represents something? This article addresses these inquiries by examining the linguistic components of *Dendera* lyrics. These components offer insights into Chimbetu’s perception of *Dendera* music as a vehicle for fostering good governance and sustainable development. Primary data were collected through lyrical content analysis and semi-structured interviews with two purposively selected music analysts.

We purposively sampled and analysed four *Dendera* song lyrics for the purpose of this study. The songs *Vana vaye* (those children) and *Magobo* (Stumps) are from the 1997 Orchestra *Dendera* Kings’ album *Survival*, which was recorded at Gramma Records. *Lullaby* is on the Orchestra *Dendera* Kings’ 1998 album *Vasiye* (Leave Them). *Ndaremerwa* (I am overwhelmed) is from the Orchestra *Dendera* Kings’ 2011 album *African Panorama* (Chapter 1). The four songs were selected because of their common feature of lyrics that explicitly or satirically allude to a crisis of governance in Zimbabwe. While there are other songs by Chimbetu that address the governance theme, such as *Zuva raenda*, Southern Africa and Governor Conwell, they were excluded as they also touched on the land issue which the authors felt to be a subject for another discussion.

The lyrics of the songs on YouTube were transcribed for analysis. Open, axial and selective manual coding procedures were qualitatively inductive (Williams & Moser, 2019). We listened to the song lyrics and at first conducted open coding to identify distinct emergent themes for categorisation of expressions. This was followed by axial coding during which we further sifted, refined, aligned, and categorised the themes. Axial coding entailed line-by-line coding in which each textual line of a song was deeply scrutinised to extract discrete thematic nuances and their interconnectivity. The process required immersion in the song text, pedantically focused on identifying textual subtleties fueling the construction of meaning. Finally, selective coding enabled the researchers to select and integrate categories of text in cohesive and meaning-filled expressions at a higher level of abstraction to formulate the governance message of the songs. Chimbetu sang about national economic development in the areas of food security, employment creation, transport, and upholding human rights.

7 Deconstructing *Dendera* lyrics: Subaltern aesthetics and political critique

In this section, we analyse lyrics from four of Simon Chimbetu’s *Dendera* songs—*Vana vaye* (“Those Children”), *Magobo* (“Stumps”), *Lullaby*, and *Ndaremerwa* (“I Am Overburdened”). These compositions provide critical insights into how *Dendera* lyrics articulate governance and development concerns in Zimbabwe. The analysis categorised the issues represented in the songs into four overarching themes: fighting for survival, unemployment, hard-heartedness, and urban commuter transport crises. These themes reveal how Chimbetu’s music captures the socio-economic struggles and political complexities of postcolonial Zimbabwe, positioning his repertoire as a cultural archive for interrogating governance, accountability, and development.

7.1 *Survival*

For decades, Zimbabweans have been engaged in a relentless struggle for survival amid political instability and economic collapse. As Munangagwa (2009) argues, the country requires a fundamental re-examination of its political conditions before long-term stabilisation can be achieved. Weak agricultural policies, military engagements, unsustainable public spending, and poor investment strategies have collectively fuelled the country’s economic demise, necessitating structural reforms.

The survival theme is poignantly articulated in *Vana vaye* (“Those Children”), which critiques inflation, food insecurity, corruption, and state negligence. The presidency has a record of flying in and out of the country numerous times for various reasons. They use chartered flights and are accompanied by a very large entourage which consumed a hefty chunk of the fiscus when travelling abroad (*Kana moenda kure kure*). In this song, Chimbetu subtly appeals to political leaders, urging them to remember the plight of ordinary citizens:

<i>Kana moenda mukoma kana moenda. . .</i>	Please comrade, when you attend [the functions with decision makers]
<i>muitaure yehupfu hwevana vaye</i>	remind them of the food to feed the hungry children.

Here, *hupfu* (mealie meal) symbolises the main ingredient for the staple food of Zimbabweans and the minimum expectation of livelihood security. Musiyiwa (2013) noted that Chimbetu laments a political elite that indulges in lavish lifestyles while neglecting the heroes, both fallen and the living, who fought for the liberation of the country from colonial rule. This critique resonates with Rothstein and Teorell’s (2008) emphasis on fairness and equal treatment as the foundation of governance legitimacy. The imagery of political leaders hosting banquets (*kana moenda kumabiko*) while children languish in poverty (*vanochema chavanoda kusurvivor*) reflects negligence and misgovernance. Chimbetu further pleads for restraint in price increases, particularly for maize meal and bread:

<i>mundisiire chingwa chevana vangu. . .</i>	Keep bread for my children
<i>vandisiirewo hupfu hwevana vaye.</i>	and also keep the mealie-meal for those children

The lyrics highlight the devastating impact of hyperinflation (*kana vokwidza mitengo yetunonaka* — when they increase prices of basic commodities), which rendered basic commodities inaccessible to many. In 2008, Zimbabwe’s economic collapse reached a point where supermarket shelves stood empty, queues for essentials were interminable, and civil service salaries were eroded by hyperinflation. Chimbetu subtly tells mukoma not to ‘forget’ the electorate (*vanokanganwa vaNyamande*), but remember to ensure they are fed (*Chawawana mukoma udye nehama*), underscoring the expectation that political representatives must deliver policies that secure livelihoods, not perpetuate precarity.

Chimbetu is directing the grievances to “mukoma,” contextually referring to the political leadership, epitomised by the presidency. The term “vana” in this context refers to the suffering citizens. In Foucauldian governmentality, the state shifts responsibility for economic hardship onto the citizens in such situations. Citizens are forced to govern their own budgeting in line with market reality in the face of structural precarity. The state does not directly intervene to alleviate economic woes.

7.2 Unemployment

Investment and growth in Zimbabwe’s economy have been shrinking, with companies closing operations. The more than 5,000 people who graduate from tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe have found getting a job and contributing to their country’s development a nightmare because the local industry and economy cannot offer them anything. The unemployment rate is more than 85 percent (J. Mpofu & Chimhenga, 2016). The lyrics of the following song *Magobo* (Stumps) summarise the unemployment crisis faced by graduates in Zimbabwe.

Magobo is a song of sacrifices that school leavers and vocational training graduates must make due to high levels of unemployment in the urban centres (*Chikoro ndakapeda basa ndakadzidza, asi harisati ramuka muno muchirungu*). These youths end up working as unskilled labourers (*Chokwadi ndichanochera nyangwe makandiwa, rudo rwuchandiurayisa nemagobo*). This is evidence that they end up sacrificing so as to satisfy their lover (*nyaya yerudo ichandisvitsa kure kure*) by working even in fiery conditions (*Chokwadi ndichanoshanda nyangwe pane moto, ndovavarira kuyanana nyaya yerudo*). Machingo and Sayeed

(2019) says that “While youth unemployment as well as graduate unemployment in Zimbabwe is given pre-eminence in several discussion fora, there is evidence that it is increasing instead of receding, with some statistics indicating that it is hovering around 85%.” The country has a very high literacy rate, but unemployment is 85%. Dodo and Dodo (2014) postulate that “Presently, Zimbabwe’s unemployment rate stands at over 85% and literacy rate at over 92%”. According to M. Mpofu (2020), youth unemployment has contributed to the increase in international legal and illegal migration as unemployed youth go in search of decent employment and a better life. In the last decade, Zimbabwe has experienced the worst brain drain, with millions migrating to neighbouring countries in the region and to overseas countries (Masiwa & Chilunjika, 2021). South Africa is accommodating more than 2 million Zimbabweans, not including the undocumented. Most of those who have migrated to neighbouring South Africa and Botswana are youth, both skilled and unskilled. Unemployment leads even the educated to stoop low and work in the farms under the supervision of foremen, uprooting stumps and making contour ridges (*NaForomani heyi heyi kumagobo, ndini uyo cheru cheru kumakandiwa*). Magobo is a song that aptly captures the desperation of the next generation of the country’s workers.

Chimbetu embodies the voice of a poor unemployed young man who loves his girlfriend very much in this song. Postcolonial theory contends that the enduring structural legacies of colonial and racialized economic organization lead to chronic unemployment in Zimbabwe. The attainment of political independence did not dismantle the economic dependency on former colonial and global-capitalist markets. Internalized colonial structural legacies continue to dog productive economic participation due to misgovernance in Zimbabwe and economic sanctions.

7.3 *Hard-heartedness*

Chimbetu also addresses the brutality and impunity characterising Zimbabwe’s governance landscape. *Lullaby* laments human rights abuses, arbitrary killings, torture, and cruelty (*ivo vane hutsinye*) inflicted on civilians. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Report (2020) documents the human rights violations, highlighting the absence of accountability. Rosenbloom and Piotrowski (2005) argue that governments must be governed by laws rather than the whims of individuals; yet in Zimbabwe, impunity has persisted, allowing perpetrators of violence to evade justice.

The cruelty has deep historical roots. Between 1982 and 1988, an estimated 10,000–20,000 civilians were killed during the Gukurahundi atrocities, accompanied by widespread torture, rape, and mutilation (Killander & Nyathi, 2015). Later, opposition members were targeted, with Zimbabwe Unity Movement candidates murdered in the early 1990s and MDC supporters subjected to violence during the 2000 and 2002 elections (Tendi, 2013). The 2008 elections witnessed an orchestrated campaign of intimidation, torture, and assassinations designed to secure ZANU PF’s hold on power (Masunungure, 2009). Even within the ruling elite, mysterious deaths of figures such as Solomon Mujuru, Sibusiso Moyo, and Perrence Shiri have fuelled speculation about intra-party violence. *Lullaby* thus becomes a lyrical indictment of systemic cruelty and state-orchestrated violence that has marred Zimbabwe’s postcolonial history.

This is a solemn song that implicitly speaks out on the cruelty of a world where murder is no longer feared and life no longer valued. The extent of the gruesomeness of cruelty is expressed when Chimbetu says they can murder innocent people and even the child of God. Chimbetu makes an effort to comfort the pain bearer through the words *nyarara kacheche, usacheme yawaona iyi hondo* (be quiet toddler, do not cry because of this war which you are experiencing). The song moves on to change the beat soon after the counselling which depicts an I don’t care attitude.

7.4 *Transport challenges in the cities*

Urban commuting in Zimbabwe is a daily struggle for many workers, with exorbitant fares and unreliable transport infrastructure compounding the economic burdens they face. For most urban dwellers, commuting consumes a significant portion of household income. Return fares average one United States dollar, but can double during peak hours, adverse weather conditions, or for longer routes such as Chitungwiza and Norton which are 30 km and 40km away from Harare respectively. Many commuters must take two buses

each way, spending two dollars or more daily, while thousands of Harare's workers face persistent fuel shortages and scarcity of vehicle spare parts. This transport crisis is articulated in Chimbetu's *Ndaremerwa* ("I Am Burdened"), where he laments:

Babamukuru honaika Sunday Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday Mugovera Ndaremerwa

(Uncle, look, I am burdened the whole week).

His lyrics describe the distance between home and workplace symbolising the physical and economic obstacles confronting ordinary Zimbabweans. He sings,

Kumunda kwangu kure nekwandinovata, kwandinoshanda kure nekwandinovata

(The field I work in is far from my home, and my workplace is also far from my home.)

Zimbabwe's deteriorating socio-economic situation has exposed the neglect and discrimination embedded within its public transport system, failures that originate with the state itself (Ndebele, 2020). Despite assurances from the state-owned Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO), the situation has deteriorated. ZUPCO's limited fleet is overwhelmed, forcing commuters to endure long queues, delays, and overcrowding (Tamborinyoka, 2002). Private omnibuses, once a vital supplement to urban transport, were banned and ordered to register under ZUPCO, further straining supply. Commuters, including security guards and other low-income earners, express despair at their inability to afford private operators charging in US dollars, with some forced to sleep at workplaces to avoid daily travel costs. ZUPCO officials acknowledge shortages of buses and fuel, while overcrowded conditions undermine public health measures such as social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chateuka, 2020).

The state is governing "at a distance" when read through Foucauldian governmentality. The transport crisis in Zimbabwe epitomises both infrastructural failure and *mishikashika* (unregulated transport operators), and citizens are forced to navigate, improvise and endure a risky terrain in survival mode. Some of the commuters resort to cycling to and from work as an alternative in the face of the transport crisis characterised by high bus fares and inadequate means.

The collapse of rail commuter services exacerbated the problems. Once carrying over 120,000 passengers daily, the National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ) is now in near-terminal decline, employing about 7,000 workers but generating minimal revenue (Moyo, 2021). The near disappearance of rail transport has left urban commuters vulnerable to exploitation by private operators. As one Harare commuter remarked: "We used to have regular local commuter trains, but now they are rarely available, and [minibus] operators are daily milking us of our hard-earned cash" (cited in Moyo, 2021). In the song, Chimbetu represents the voice of the overwhelmed ordinary citizen.

The interpretive subtlety of Chimbetu's *Ndaremerwa* is evident in its rhetorical framing. Rather than overtly confronting state authorities, the song adopts familial language, addressing an elder, Babamukuru ("uncle"), as a metaphor for political leaders. As Music Analyst 1 (personal communication, 31 August 2025) notes, "This rhetorical strategy positions the music as a moral rather than revolutionary critique: an appeal to conscience rather than a direct political confrontation." Music Analyst 2 (personal communication, 2 September 2025) concurs, stating that Chimbetu's songs such as *Survival* and *One Week* highlight inflation, cost of living, and the struggles of civil servants who live hand-to-mouth. His lyrics expose systemic neglect and elite looting but do so through subtle, coded appeals rather than overt denunciation. In this way, Chimbetu transforms everyday transport struggles into broader critiques of governance failure, demonstrating how music functions as both a record of lived hardship and a moral commentary on political irresponsibility.

8 Decolonial revelations: Re-reading governance and development trajectories

Arbitrary political appointments have long characterised Zimbabwe's urban councils, exacerbating many of the challenges vividly captured in Chimbetu's music. Such appointments often prioritise the narrow interests of national politicians over the needs of residents, thereby undermining service delivery in critical areas such as food security, transport, water provision, and housing (Jonga & Chirisa, 2009). They call for the inclusion of broader stakeholder participation and direct democratic practices to complement representative democracy, ensuring that leaders remain accountable to their constituencies. In this regard, Chimbetu's songs provide cultural testimony and empirical insight into governance failures, foregrounding the urgent need for inclusive, participatory, and accountable governance as a pathway to poverty reduction and sustainable development.

Since the turn of the millennium, Zimbabwe's governance crisis has manifested through entrenched corruption, mass unemployment, transport failures, chronic energy shortages, recurrent economic instability, and contested political legitimacy. The state has often responded with a heavy-handed securocrat approach marked by torture, disappearances, and the imposition of command currencies, such as bearer cheques, bond notes, and the recently introduced ZiG, which cannot be used internationally. Against this backdrop, Chimbetu's music remains strikingly relevant nearly two decades after his death. His lyrics continue to resonate with ordinary citizens who endure persistent bread-and-butter struggles while political elites maintain extravagant lifestyles and preside over the open plunder of national resources. Fuel and electricity shortages remain unresolved, the national airline has collapsed, and public transport systems are in disarray. Hyperinflation continues to erode livelihoods, perpetuating cycles of despair that mirror the crises Chimbetu so poignantly chronicled in song.

Tracks such as *Vana vaye*, *Magobo*, *Lullaby*, and *Ndaremerwa* emerged from contexts of acute hardship and reflect the lived realities of Zimbabwe's working classes. In these compositions, Chimbetu documents the daily struggles of urban communities, particularly those in high-density suburbs, who remain locked in economic precarity despite their efforts to survive through limited industrial and informal opportunities. His lyrics move beyond lamentation to constitute a subtle form of cultural activism. Employing Shona, a language accessible to the majority, Chimbetu's music functions simultaneously as critique and mobilisation, empowering marginalised communities to situate their own struggles within broader demands for justice, equity, and accountability. As Perman (2012) notes, *Sungura* flourished during periods of severe economic decline in Zimbabwe, serving both as a soundtrack to crisis and a vehicle for political commentary.

The persistence of economic decline (Munangagwa, 2009) since the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) era underscores the enduring salience of Chimbetu's work. Conflicting political narratives surrounding the causes of Zimbabwe's crises have undermined pragmatic policy responses, while the country has witnessed extensive brain drain, hollowing out vital sectors such as health, education, and mining (Chirombe, 2019). Public services have deteriorated to such an extent that political leaders routinely seek medical treatment abroad while citizens face the collapse of local facilities. Within this context, Chimbetu's repertoire functions as a cultural archive of bad governance, articulating the enduring struggles of ordinary Zimbabweans and demonstrating the potency of popular music as a medium for interpreting, contesting, and documenting governance and development in postcolonial Zimbabwe.

9 Conclusion

This paper examined how Simon Chimbetu's *Dendera* music functions as a cultural lens through which the governance crisis in Zimbabwe can be interrogated. Far from serving merely as entertainment, his songs constitute poignant reflections on the persistent challenges of bad governance that have afflicted the nation since the turn of the millennium. Rooted in Zimbabwe's cultural landscape, Chimbetu's music captures and communicates the despair of ordinary citizens while simultaneously providing commentary on their resilience, frustrations, and aspirations. Although aligned with the ruling party, Chimbetu's lyrical

narratives amplify the struggles of the marginalised and disenfranchised, thereby raising awareness of pressing socio-economic and political issues.

The analysis demonstrated that, despite their seemingly straightforward composition, Chimbetu's lyrics act as a powerful communicative tool that both documents and critiques the socio-economic hardships confronting urban residents. His music highlights critical themes such as unemployment, corruption, food insecurity and the erosion of civil rights, while also resonating deeply with audiences by fostering a sense of empathy, solidarity, and cultural identity. In doing so, *Dendera* music contributes to the formation of a collective consciousness that interrogates governance failures and sustains public memory of socio-economic struggles.

The insights generated through Chimbetu's repertoire offer valuable lessons for policymakers, community leaders, and scholars alike. By engaging with the themes articulated in his songs, stakeholders can gain a nuanced understanding of Zimbabwe's multifaceted crisis and, in turn, design more responsive and participatory interventions to address the nation's enduring governance and development challenges. Ultimately, Chimbetu's work transcends the boundaries of artistic expression, standing as a critical commentary on Zimbabwean society and a potential catalyst for reflection, dialogue, and meaningful change.

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