Reclaiming cultural identity: the potential transformative role of postcolonial festivals in Lesotho

Rethabile Malibo

Imagine a country so high in the clouds that its lowest point is higher than the peaks of most other nations. Lesotho, a small, landlocked kingdom surrounded by South Africa, may be limited in area, but what it lacks in square kilometres, it compensates in altitude, beauty and cultural resilience. With rugged mountains covering three-quarters of its terrain, it has earned the nickname *Kingdom in the Sky*. However, behind this picturesque scenery lies a history of cultural disruption shaped by colonialism, missionary intervention and post-independence modernisation. This article examines contemporary cultural festivals – specifically the Morija Arts and Cultural Festival (MACuFe) and the Maletsunyane Braai Festival (MBF) – as platforms for cultural reclamation, creative economies and the reconstruction of national identity in postcolonial Lesotho.

Using postcolonial theory[1] and cultural economy frameworks,[2] I argue that festivals in Lesotho serve as sites of cultural resistance, economic opportunity and ideological contestation. Comparing MACuFe and MBF, I explore how heritage preservation and contemporary culture are connected in a cultural system that is under-resourced.

1 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'Decolonising the Mind', *Diogenes* 46, no. 184 (1998).
2 David Throsby, *Economics and Culture* (Cambridge: Canbridge University Press, 2001); Christiaan De Beukelaer, 'The UNESCO/UNDP 2013 Creative Economy Report: Perks and Perils of an Evolving Agenda', *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 44, no. 2 (2014).

Postcolonial festivals in Africa

Postcolonial festivals in Africa have evolved alongside shifts in how African history, culture and power are interpreted. Early colonial and mid-20th-century scholarship, influenced by anthropology, treated African festivals as static remnants of tradition, detached from political struggle and historical change.[3] This perspective began to change in the 1960s and 1970s, as postcolonial festivals were recognised as sites of cultural resistance and political reawakening. A key reference is FESTAC held in 1977, a symbolic event aimed at restoring African historical consciousness after colonial erasure.[4] It brought together artists, intellectuals and performers from across Africa and the diaspora. Other festivals included FESMAN (Dakar), FESTAC (Lagos) and PANAFEST. These festivals emerged as cultural platforms that celebrated African identity, artistic production and historical consciousness in the aftermath of colonial rule. The performances provided spaces for emotional, spiritual and historical connection between Africa and its diaspora, enabling participants to engage with shared histories of displacement memory and cultural identity (Schramm, 2000; Holsey, 2008).[5]

At a continental level, the African Union's (AU), Charter for African Cultural Renaissance and other initiatives encourage member states to protect cultural heritage, promote African identity and strengthen creative industries as pillars of sustainable development while also supporting cultural exchange across the continent. In this broader context, post-colonial festivals function not only as cultural or artistic events but also as platforms for cultural diplomacy, tourism and economic development.

Beginning in the 2000s, scholarship on postcolonial festivals began to focus more closely on their economic aspects, influenced by the rise of creative economies and cultural policy studies.[6] For example, the Eswatini Bushfire Festival shows how contemporary African festivals now operate at the intersection of art, tourism, corporate sponsorship and social activism.[7] However,

3 Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition Revisited: The Case of Colonial Africa', in *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-Century Africa*, ed. Terence Ranger and Olufemi Vaughan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993).

4 David Murphy, Martin Munro and Tsitsi Jaji, 'The Performance of Pan-African Identities at Black and African Cultural Festivals', *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 7 (2018) https://doi.org/10.1080/13698 01X.2018.1476038; Cheikh Anta Diop and Harold Salemson, *Precolonial Black Africa* (Chicago: Review Press, 2012).

5 Katharina Schramm, *African Homecoming: Pan-African Ideology and Contested Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Bayo Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

6 Throsby, *Economics and Culture*; Terry Flew, *The Creative Industries: Culture and Policy* (London: SAGE, 2012).

7 Paul Nkemngu Acha-Any and Neliswa Nomkhosi Dlamini, 'Festival Tourism as an Instrument of Sustainable Livelihood in Eswatini', *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites* 26, no. 3 (2019) https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.26314-402.

while festivals generate income, visibility and employment, they also risk becoming highly commercialised. African postcolonial festivals are thus complex spaces where cultural memory, political meaning and economic ambition coexist.[8] MACuFe and the MBF reflect this hybridity. MACuFe resonates with FESTAC and PANAFEST, while the MBF aligns with the entrepreneurial creative-economy model exemplified by Bushfire.

The Basotho context

The arrival of missionaries in Lesotho in 1833 marked a cultural shift. While the missionaries introduced formal education and Christianity, they also facilitated the systematic displacement of the Basotho's indigenous knowledge systems, such as initiation schools and performative traditions, which were banned and labelled heathen. Even after Lesotho gained independence in 1966, the impacts of colonialism persisted. As Fanon observed, postcolonial societies often inherit psychological fragmentation alongside political sovereignty.[9] In Lesotho, this manifested as a decline in the transmission of indigenous cultural knowledge and ambivalent attitudes towards cultural and traditional expressions such as costume and music.

MACuFe was established in 1998 by the Morija Museum and Archives following political instability marked by looting and violence in Lesotho. MACuFe's objective was to unite Basotho across political and religious divisions. The festival takes place in Morija, affectionately known as *Selibeng sa Thuto* (the Well of Knowledge). Morija holds immense cultural significance; it is home to Lesotho's first printing press, teacher training college and church.[10] MACuFe is held annually between late September and early October for five days, featuring performing arts, cultural exhibitions, competitions and capacity-building workshops. The festival's overriding theme, *Kaofele re chabana sa Khomo* (unity in diversity), amplifies a pluralistic understanding of Basotho identity at a time when globalisation intensifies cultural homogenisation.

Beyond cultural preservation, the festival also contributed to the development of the arts by providing a structured performance circuit in the absence of a national theatre or arts council. MACuFe served as the primary national platform for local artists' visibility. However, despite its cultural legitimacy and nation-building role, MACuFe remained structurally vulnerable due to inconsistent funding, inadequate infrastructure and limited long-term government commitment. These challenges contributed to its decline and led to a ten-year hiatus.

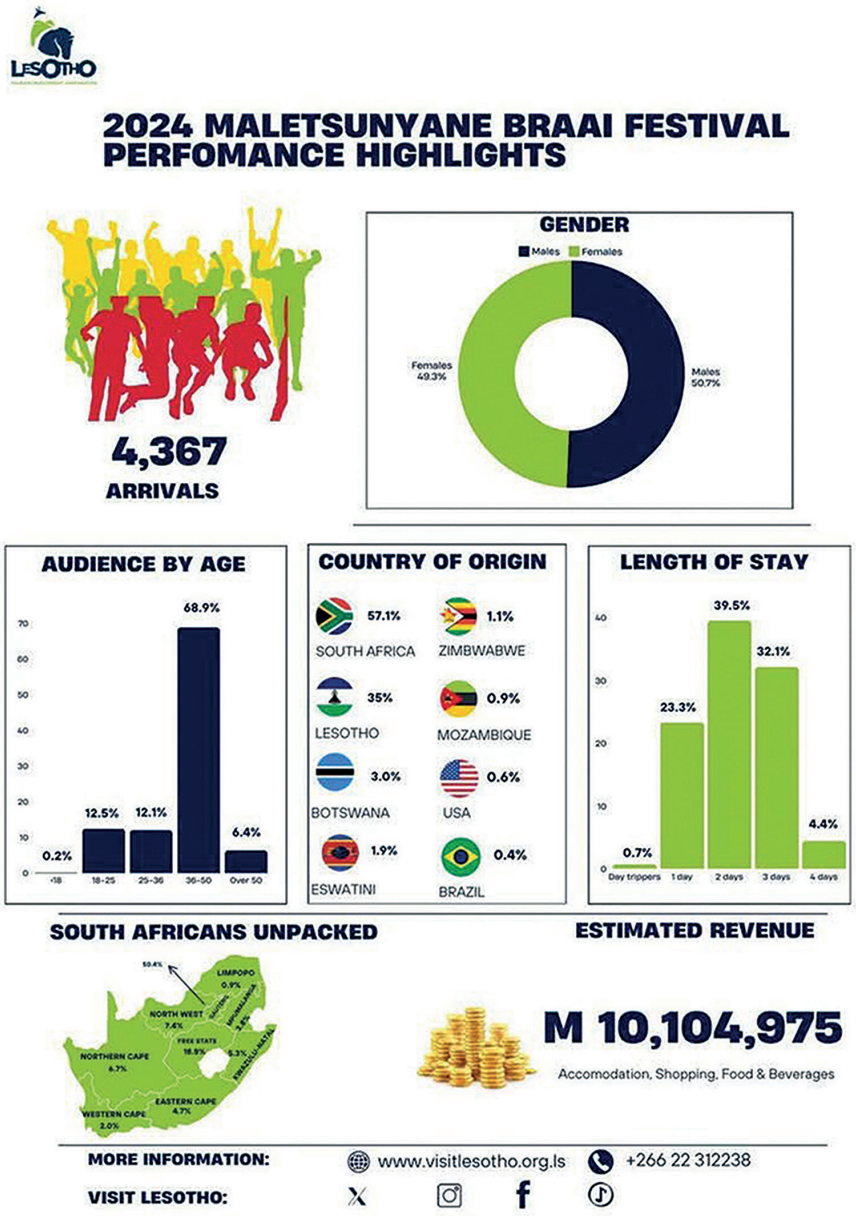
8 De Beukelaer, 'The UNESCO/UNDP 2013'.
9 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.
10 Daniel P. Kunene, '*Leselinyana la Lesotho* and Sotho Historiography', *History in Africa* 4 (1977).

By contrast, MBF, established in 2016 by Basotho, represents a new generation of postcolonial festivals motivated by entrepreneurship, tourism and the creative industries. The MBF is held annually in Semonkong at Maletsunyane Falls – the highest single-drop waterfall in Southern Africa. The falls plunge 192 metres into a gorge, making it one of the most beautiful spots in Africa. MBF takes full advantage of this natural wonder, with events spanning three days on the last weekend of November. Activities include camping, braai competitions, music, fashion pop-ups, craft markets, local beer tastings, blanket presentations and family activities such as helicopter rides and horseback riding. Between 2023 and 2024, MBF experienced significant growth: attendance more than doubled, with international guests from Southern Africa, the USA and Brazil, and revenue surpassed $589,200.00 USD. This growth illustrates how contemporary festivals in Lesotho combine tourism, entertainment and cultural activities to attract local and international visitors. Figure 2 demonstrates the economic potential of festival tourism within Lesotho's creative economies.

Unlike MACuFe's heritage preservation mandate, MBF exemplifies the creative-economy model described by Throsby, in which culture is mobilised as both symbolic capital and an economic engine.[11] Both festivals are staking Lesotho's claim in Africa's cultural renaissance and serve as potent tools for driving economic development.

Fig. 01
Boys performing *Ndlamo* (Image: Morija Museum and Archives)

11 Throsby, *Economics and Culture*.



Challenges and prospects of postcolonial festivals in Lesotho

Despite their ideological differences, MACuFe and MBF face a common set of structural challenges that reflect deeper policy, governance and infrastructural deficits in Lesotho's cultural economy. These challenges are interconnected and affect the sustainability and ideological direction of festival culture.

Funding

Festival sustainability in Lesotho relies heavily on corporate sponsorship, particularly from telecommunications companies.

Fig. 02
Demographics of the Maletsunyane Braai Festival's visitors (Infographic: visitlesotho.org.ls/statistical-reports)

Fig. 03
Maletsunye Falls (Image: BagelBelt)

While this support sustains operations, it prioritises market interests over heritage and community participation, marginalising the indigenous traditions the festivals are meant to preserve. For example, in MACuFe, a significant portion of the sponsor's budget was allocated to securing popular acts from South Africa, sidelining grassroots, community-driven elements and local artists. To maintain other cultural activities, MACuFe depended on ticket sales priced as low as $1 USD, which generated little revenue and starved these activities of resources. The market-driven approach diluted the festivals' educational and heritage mandates.

Conversely, MBF's commercial success demonstrates how corporate-friendly programming can secure financial stability, yet it also raises concerns about the long-term cultural consequences of festival commodification. If not carefully balanced, cultural festivals risk shifting from cultural movements to marketing campaigns.

Festival ownership

A key question is who owns cultural festivals. MACuFe is privately owned, yet it represents national heritage. So, who

truly owns these festivals: the community or the government? Unclear distinctions between government control, community custodianship and private management weaken accountability structures and compromise cultural sustainability. For instance, when the government moved Independence Day celebrations from Morija to Maseru, it reduced MACuFe attendance. The clash of events was not just a change in location but a split in identity, a silent conflict over heritage. Instead of uniting Basotho, the events divided them. This raises the question of the government's role in protecting cultural spaces. True cultural revitalisation requires shared stewardship; without it, cultural festivals risk becoming turf wars rather than platforms for unity.

MBF, while privately owned, receives public-sector support, raising questions about the governance of state support to private cultural enterprises: how much support is appropriate, how should it be provided, and who qualifies? Without formalised frameworks defining stakeholder responsibilities, festivals remain vulnerable to political shifts and private withdrawal.

Event clashing

The absence of a national festival calendar and coordination has led to destructive competition. The emergence of the Mangaung Cultural Festival (MACufe) in Bloemfontein, South Africa concurrent with MACuFe in Lesotho, with a larger budget and a more prominent lineup, drew audiences and performers away from Morija. Other festivals in Lesotho also emerged and were held around the same time as MACuFe. These dynamics affect underfunded festivals differently, disadvantaging them relative to larger ones. To survive, strategic local and regional partnerships are therefore essential for sustainability

Infrastructure

Although the Lesotho National Cultural Policy (2017) and the Extended National Strategic Development Plan II 2023/24-2027/28 recognise the economic potential of creative industries, institutional implementation remains weak. Currently, Lesotho lacks a national theatre, cinematographic infrastructure, professional recording studios and a national arts council. Creative arts associations, such as the Theatre Association of Lesotho (THALE) and the Motion Picture Association of Lesotho (MPALE), exist without offices or funding. In the absence of tax incentives for creative industries, private investment and commitment remain limited. Consequently, cultural labour continues to operate informally, and creative-arts graduates face persistent structural exclusion.

Archiving

Despite its cultural impact, MACuFe lacks a comprehensive institutional digital archive. The absence of documentation undermines cultural historiography, assessment and intergenerational transmission. As Assmann argues, cultural memory without archives is structurally vulnerable to erasure.[12] In Lesotho, this threatens ongoing cultural continuity. The experience is different for MBF, which benefits from informal digital documentation; however, these materials remain commercially oriented. The lack of a national digital-heritage strategy threatens long-term cultural continuity.

Both festivals operate in persistent tension between cultural reverence and commercial exploitation. While commodification generates revenue, it risks transforming sacred traditions into mere entertainment. The challenge is to develop cultural-enterprise models that maintain cultural significance while remaining sustainable.[13]

Culture commodification

There is a fine line between celebrating, honouring and preserving traditions, and the commercialisation of culture, which involves generating income and attracting tourists. However, what happens when sacred traditions become hashtags? Should traditional practices be live-streamed? Should sacred songs be remixed? Should traditional art be diluted for brand appeal? These are questions that cultural festivals should consistently ask, and in contexts where traditions are already suppressed, it becomes a fight for survival.

Lesotho's festivals have demonstrated that culture is not a luxury; it is infrastructure. However, limitations remain that must be addressed to realise the potential of these festivals. Lesotho must:

- Build digital cultural archives by capturing, curating and preserving festival performances, oral histories and art.
- Forge partnerships with the AU, the private sector and the diaspora to fund, promote and expand these festivals.
- Invest in ethical enterprise by providing training, developing fair-trade artisan markets and supporting youth entrepreneurship. Let cultural pride become both an income stream and a museum exhibit.

12 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

13 De Beukelaer, 'The UNESCO/UNDP 2013'; Joost Dessein et al., eds., *Culture in, for and as Sustainable Development. Conclusions from the COST Action IS1007 Investigating Cultural Sustainability* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 2015).

- Provide tax rebates for the private sector, especially for businesses that support the creative industries.

Culture is central to Africa's development. The Charter for African Cultural Renaissance and frameworks for creative economies offer guidelines for how festivals can promote Pan-African unity, increase youth employment and safeguard cultural heritage. MBF and MACuFe should follow these guidelines to secure funding and gain visibility and support from the region. Imagine a Pan-African festival circuit where artists can tour across borders, cultural works are widely shared, and nations celebrate their identities together. Lesotho can join this collaboration to unlock funding.

Conclusion

MACuFe and MBF represent two interconnected, yet ideologically distinct, trajectories of postcolonial festival culture in Lesotho. MACuFe emphasises collective memory, intergenerational pedagogy and heritage, while MBF foregrounds youth-driven creative economies, digital branding and tourism. Comparing these two festivals demostrates that cultural festivals in Lesotho can simulataneously preserve heritage and foster economic activity.

However, without strong cultural leadership, reliable funding, proper archival preservation and national support for the creative industry, festival sustainability remains precarious. Unless these structural deficits are addressed, Lesotho risks losing not only the festivals but also the broader ecosystems of cultural knowledge production and economic empowerment they foster.

Ultimately, reclaiming cultural identity through festivals extends beyond remembering the past. It involves negotiating how cultural heritage can be preserved, interpreted and economically sustained within contemporary creative economies as well as strategic negotiation over the nation's cultural future in a rapidly changing creative economy. Festivals thus emerge as both instruments of resistance against cultural erasure and laboratories for inclusive postcolonial development.

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