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# The Evolution of Digital Dance: Choreography in the Age of Motion Capture and Avatars, a case of Nairobi City County

**Freda Agata & Amon Kipyegon Kirui**
*Kabarak University, Kenya*

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**Abstract**
This study examines the redefinition of stage art within Kenya's distinct cultural scenes through the lens of innovative digital technologies, encompassing both viral social media choreography and avatar-based heritage projects. This is linked to an exploration of artificial intelligence (AI) in a country as diverse as Kenya, where many novelties still have to be adapted or even made from scratch. This study seeks to investigate how dances on social media, which are disseminated in a way analogous to the passage of a virus, both shape the content of choreography and expression a performer must use, but also threaten traditional cultures to the point that they vanish. The paper employs a netnographic approach focused on three key digital field sites: the group Matata, the "Heroes of Kenya" avatar project, and the infrastructure of Nairobi-based motion capture studios. This paper, drawing on the Afrofuturism theoretical lens while analysing academic articles, reports, and social media (Instagram/TikTok, for example) from Kenyan artists, examines how Kenyans manage traditional dance on digital platforms at the same time that they are pioneering new contemporary forms. Kenyan artists today may be called weavers of digital culture. They blend tradition with artistic vocations and look for social media to influence dance style again, as a way of providing a mass experience over distances to make their new forms--hybrid homilies to an African future? Despite concerns about data ownership, loss of authenticity as folk arts migrates to the internet and assertions that technology would taint the spirit in our own cultures, these technologies are new tools for artists to tell their stories and make people feel close by.

## Introduction
Kenya, often dubbed "Silicon Savannah," has solidified its position as a new hub for innovation and technological development within Africa (Ndemo, 2021). Within this context, Nairobi serves as the central location from which a considerable amount of the country's vibrant creative economy operates (Baraza Media Lab, 2022). This activity is fundamentally driven by a young, tech-savvy population that is utilizing technology to redefine cultural representation (Citizen Reporter, 2023; Lisowski, 2024). Technology is acknowledged as a major element in both the creation and distribution of output across the creative sector, including the performing arts (Baraza Media Lab, 2022). Creators utilize digital platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, which are instrumental channels for content discovery in the East African market (Baraza Media Lab, 2022). The visibility gained from creating content, such as recording elaborate dance videos in public spaces (AP News, 2025; Citizen Reporter, 2023), allows

artists to share their craft internationally, fulfilling the global demand for African voices and stories (U.S. Embassy in Kenya & American Chamber of Commerce in Kenya, 2025). However, reliance on technology presents challenges, primarily financial, related to the high cost of acquiring equipment and maintaining ongoing access to necessary services (Baraza Media Lab, 2022).

This intensive engagement with digital tools signifies a major cultural shift, positioning dance as a viable pursuit for a "digital livelihood". The attractiveness of content creation is amplified by Kenya's challenging employment landscape, where nearly half of the youth prefer to pursue entrepreneurship (Youth Agenda, 2023), and three in five unemployed individuals are aged 15–35 (Youth Agenda, 2023). Performance is monetised through diverse avenues, which include direct payments from consumers, indirect revenue channelled via platforms (such as sales generated from views on TikTok and YouTube), and external grants (Baraza Media Lab, 2022). Some creators formalise their efforts by establishing talent management agencies that aim to empower young creatives to achieve success and earn income as dancers. Furthermore, this creative momentum was actively encouraged by supportive policy; in September 2022, the Nairobi County Governor waived the Single Business Permit fee for freelance photographers and filmmakers (AP News, 2025). This action aimed to amend "archaic" laws that had previously constrained the creative sector by imposing permit fees of up to KES 5,000 for a single day, reinforcing the government's commitment to position Kenya as a global hub for creative excellence (U.S. Embassy in Kenya & American Chamber of Commerce in Kenya, 2025).

This paper examines a future digital performance landscape beyond the social media screen, in which a dancer's body is interfaced with sophisticated digital systems through motion capture and avatars. Such technologies function as a deeper, more radical digital embodiment by transforming the dynamics of performance into data and representing them in other, virtual avatars. Although there is an increasing body of studies on the influence of social media on dance (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Lisowski, 2024), there is a notable void in research on the take-up and innovation of these more technically oriented tools within Kenya's pluralistic cultures. Drawing on and responding to these gaps, this study centres on a key research question: How are motion capture and avatar technologies affecting the practice of choreography, dancer performance and representation, and cultural heritage conservation in Nairobi, and what are the related issues concerning data ownership rights and cultural integrity? Anchored in Afrofuturist theory, this analysis posits that the rise of motion capture and avatar-based dance in Nairobi constitutes a profound act of cultural production. It anticipates that Kenyan creators are emerging as "digital culture weavers," who blend tradition with contemporary artistic languages to choreograph new, hybrid African futures (Kuyenga, 2024).

## Theoretical Framework

### *a. Afrofuturism as an analytic lens*

To understand the cultural significance of digital dance in Nairobi, this paper employs Afrofuturism as its primary theoretical lens. Coined by Mark Dery in 1993, Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic and philosophy that explores the intersection of African diasporic culture with science and technology (Dery, 1993). It is more than a subgenre of science fiction; it is defined as an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation (Womack, 2013). The framework is a vehicle for what echoes past and projects future, in its use as a tool of historical recovery but also of future-projection that invites artists to destabilise larger narratives by imagining Black futures out of Afro-diasporic roots (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.; The Phillips Collection, 2024). By centring Black figures in technologically advanced and speculative narratives, Afrofuturism reframes agency and reclaims a future from which Black bodies have often been erased (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.; Womack, 2013).

While Afrofuturism provides a broad diasporic framework, African futurism must also be employed. This term was coined by Nnedi Okorafor (Death, 2021) and differs from Afrofuturism in that it is "a thing of Africa: rooted first and foremost in Africa," encompassing a wide range of African cultures and mythologies. This change of emphasis is vital for placing Nairobi in context. This theoretical approach is also evident in the work of some Kenyan artists. For example, photographer Osborne Macharia sees his work as "an artistic reinterpretation of post-colonial African history by integrating elements of the past, present realities and future aspirations, into a bold new vision for Africa" (Google Arts & Culture; n.d.). His practice of inventing fictional, alternative African worlds can be seen as an actual offshoot from a foundation in African futurist principles (Zonneveld, 2020). Similarly, the work of Kenyan-American artist Wangechi Mutu sets a powerful precedent. Her sculptures and animations often feature hybrid figures - part human, animal and machine - that provide social commentary on colonial death, at the same time drawing upon East African folk customs to probe self and power. (Google Arts & Culture, n.d.; The Guardian, 2013; The Phillips Collection, 2024) Mutu's creations attest to a long-established artistic engagement with technologically mediated, hybrid bodies that lies conceptually at the heart of the digital dance avatar.

*b.* ***Decolonising the digital canvas***

A counter-story is essential to prevent a purely utopian interpretation of technology. The theory of "digital colonialism" provides this essential critique, positing that historical colonial dynamics are being replicated in the digital realm (Couldry & Mejias, 2025). Instead of extracting natural resources, the new colonial project appropriates "human life itself, converted into data streams for economic value and control" (Couldry & Mejias, 2025). This process rests on data extractivism, infrastructure control, and platform hegemony, which universalise Western norms and values (Couldry & Mejias, 2025). The tools at the heart of this study, social media platforms and motion capture technologies, are not neutral; they are embedded within this colonial matrix (Risam, 2018). Their performance can be read as Afrofuturist agency, but it also manipulates them within a system of extractive data. The digital dance avatar functions as a site of this tension: an icon alluding to a future yet written and the result of a potentially exploitative data collection operation.

**Methodology**

This study utilises a qualitative research design that integrates netnography with secondary data analysis. This combination of digital fieldwork and analysis of the creative economy's infrastructure enables the study to examine specific digital artefacts and the technological ecosystem that facilitates them in greater detail than theoretical assumptions alone. The data were collected through non-participant netnographic observation of performances shared digitally between 2022 and 2025. To ensure a representative sample of the Nairobi digital dance ecosystem, the study identified three study participants, Matata, Heroes of Kenya and creative hubs within Nairobi. While Nairobi hosts a vast number of individual creators, these three cases were selected for their high informational density and their role as pioneers in the specific intersection of dance and motion-capture technology.

The analysis began with the Kenyan music group Matata's use of viral dance challenges on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. This analysis focused on how choreographic routines are typically adapted to the vertical screen format to maximise global reach while retaining local identity. Second, the study examined the Heroes of Kenya project on Google Arts & Culture as a primary case study of avatar-based representation. This analysis involved the visual rendering of historical figures to examine how digital avatars are used to "cartoonify" them while preserving Kenyan cultural heritage. Finally, to assess the hardware capabilities available to Nairobi dancers, we analysed the service portfolios of the local creative hubs Gachoki Studios and the Nairobi Game Development Centre. The

documentation regarding the "3D motion capture rigs" and visual effects services was also collected to establish the technical feasibility of high-fidelity digital performance in the Kenyan region.

Other key legislative and industry documents were used to triangulate the netnographic findings within the socio-economic arena. Some of the policy documents analysed included the Kenya Copyright Act of 2001, which was used to identify legislative gaps regarding digital ownership, and the Nairobi County Governor's waiver of business permit fees for creatives. Additionally, data on the financial viability of the creative sector was derived from the Baraza Media Lab findings report (2022), which provides critical insights into the monetisation models of the creative economy. Data from these sources were subjected to thematic analysis. The visual data, in the form of dance videos and avatar renderings, were coded under the themes of Afrofuturism and digital weaving. The textual data on policies and studio services were also analysed in relation to data sovereignty.

**Literature review**

*a.* ***From the Streets to the Screens: The TikTok-Instagram Nexus***

The current dance scene in Nairobi is also bound to a digital world stage that is provided by global social media (Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) (Akram & Kumar, 2017; Wanjala & Kebaya, 2016). This digital ecosystem has created a tangible economic dimension, offering a source of income through high viewership, brand partnerships, and direct fan engagement (AP News, 2025; Muchori & Reid, 2025). This model has been strategically used by established artists; the Kenyan music group Matata, for instance, intentionally uses viral dance challenges on TikTok and Instagram to propel their songs to mainstream success (Mugo et al., 2023). This shift has also had a discernible aesthetic impact. The logic of these platforms, which privileges virality, favours short, high-energy, and easily replicable dance routines (Kirui, 2023). The "dance challenge" format encourages a choreographic language that is accessible and modular, often focusing on a memorable. The platform itself thus becomes a co-choreographer, shaping the dance that thrives within its architecture.

*b.* ***The Technology of Movement: Motion Capture in the Creative Industries***

Beyond social media lies a more advanced tool for digitising dance: motion capture (mocap). This technology records a performer's movements using sensors and translates that information into digital data to animate a 3D model or avatar (The Adobe Team, n.d.). This allows for a highly realistic and nuanced replication of the original performance. Crucially, this technology is actively available within Nairobi's creative ecosystem. The Nairobi Game Development Centre lists a "3D motion capture rig" among its core facilities available to the community. Furthermore, Gachoki, a Nairobi-based visual effects and animation studio, lists "Motion Capture" as a key service, describing their capability as turning "real-life movements into digital magic with precision" (Gachoki Studios, n.d.). The presence of these facilities confirms that the tools for creating high-fidelity digital dance are accessible to local artists, game developers, and filmmakers (Black Shepherd Technologies, n.d.).

*c.* ***Imagining the virtual avatars in Kenyan digital art***

The avatar – a digital representation of the self – is already steeped in cultural value in Nairobi, where game fans attend comic conventions, as they do elsewhere around the world, dressed as characters from games and cartoons (The Guardian, 2025). This interaction with virtual identities extends to the world of fine art. One such example is the "Heroes of Kenya" project by Kenya National Museums and Google Arts & Culture, which creates digital avatars of historical figures (Abraham, 2023). Although it has been critiqued for aesthetic choices and historical inaccuracies, it constitutes a high-profile instance of digitally rendering Kenyan identities (Abraham, 2023). This exploration is further advanced by artists using immersive technologies. The "If Objects Could Speak" project, for example,

uses Augmented Reality (AR) to create 3D digital scans of Kenyan artefacts, using the digital avatar of the object to reconnect it with its community of origin (Baruu Collective, 2024). These examples demonstrate a robust local conversation about digital representation, providing a rich context for creating a motion-captured dance avatar (Elly in Nairobi, 2019; Abraham, 2023).

**Findings and discussions**

***a. The Afrofuturist avatar***

The emergence of the Afrofuturist avatar represents the staging of a new body, where dancers in Nairobi use motion capture (Mocap) technology to translate their movements into digital entities, creating a prosthetically enhanced future self-capable of achieving Black redemption against histories of oppression (Sum, Makokha, & Ndege, 2022; Wang & Yu, 2022). This was observed in the 'Heroes of Kenya' project, where historical figures were rendered not as hyper-realistic humans, but as stylised, *cartoonified* avatars. By distancing the visual representation from the physical reality, these avatars function as counter-futures that allow the figures to exist in a digital realm untouched by colonial constraints. This process grounds Black speculative arts in a quest for liberation by harnessing technology to articulate counter-futures that fundamentally oppose Western-dominated visions of progress (Eshun, 2003; Yaszek, 2021). By utilising immersive tools like Virtual Reality (VR), this practice moves beyond traditional performance limitations, enabling dancers to create innovative choreographies that seamlessly blend physical action with responsive digital environments (Ojha, 2024).

***b. Digital weavers: technology as a contemporary loom***

The digital weaver metaphor is an extremely valuable cultural framework, as it relates the body-based cultural knowledge of the dancer's gestures, the fundamental thread, with the traditional advanced African understanding of weaving, in which textiles act as memory banks and are symbols of identity. Motion capture (Mocap) serves as a digital loom, accurately mapping the kinematic paths of dancers' movements and transforming these data into models that enable the development of a highly realistic digital model of the dancer, or digital tapestry. For example, the viral choreography of the group Matata demonstrates this 'weaving' by condensing complex traditional footwork into upper-body gestures that fit the vertical framing of TikTok screens. The technology effectively acts as the loom, stripping away the spatial requirements of the village arena and re-weaving the movement for a global digital audience. In addition, the resulting digital model of the dancer has no physical boundaries, thus representing cultural heritage while creating possibilities for futures yet to be realised, as part of the Afrofuturist pursuit of freedom and the creation of "Counter-Futures" in opposition to the prevailing narratives of what constitutes "progress" (Eshun, 2003; Sum, Makokha, & Ndege, 2022). By utilising technology, digital methods do not displace long-standing storytelling traditions; instead, they provide an opportunity to enhance the aesthetic and sensory elements of performance and to redefine its physical and time-based limitations through immersion in virtual environments (Ojha, 2024).

*c.* ***Immersive horizons: VR/AR and the future of performance***

The creative technology sector in Nairobi has been at the forefront of the movement to transform performance art from traditional static formats to digital forms that are both interactive and experiential. The transition has utilised cutting-edge technologies such as Motion Capture (Mocap), which captures the dancer's precise movement and converts it into a virtual avatar or 3D model. This enhances the realism and interactivity of the digital performance (Wang & Yu, 2022). The technical capacity for this in Nairobi is evidenced by the service portfolios of local hubs such as Gachoki Studios, whose provision of '3D motion capture rigs' enables local artists to bypass Western production

facilities, thereby localising digital production. Virtual Reality (VR) has also enabled new forms of choreography in which physical movement and the digital environment converge, creating dance that transcends the limitations of time and space (Ojha, 2024). This integration alters the nature of the relationship between the artist and the audience through immersive digital platforms that foster a more participatory, interactive relationship than ever before (Liu, 2020).

***d. Copyrighting choreography in the digital age***

Copyrighting choreography has become increasingly complex in the digital world because it has become impossible to satisfy the two historical elements required for copyright protection, i.e., that a work must be "original and in a material form," while at the same time permitting the quick generation and diffusion of digital content, and thereby creating an almost unworkable guarantee of individual ownership for all the myriad ways in which viral remixes are created (Ojha, 2024). The digital method of performing, using highly accurate motion-capture technology to translate specific physical actions into data, which can then be used to build digital representations of these movements, makes choreographic works easy to reproduce in virtual worlds (Wang & Yu, 2022). In Kenya, the Copyright Act of 2001 is widely regarded as obsolete in light of the demands of today's digital economy, indicating a long-standing legislative shortcoming in protecting creators from the risk of infringement (Liu, 2020). Further, organisations whose mission is to assist creators, known as Collective Management Organisations (CMOs), have come under severe fire from African artists regarding their low payments to creators based on ambiguous accounting practices and serious conflict of interest issues concerning directors who represent CMOs in negotiations with commercial users (Liu, 2020).

***e. Data sovereignty and the performer's body***

The application of motion capture (Mocap) technology to dance raises critical questions about data sovereignty, particularly through a lens that critiques "data extractivism," in which the dancer's kinetic embodiment is converted into data subject to perpetual ownership by capturing entities (Wang & Yu, 2022). This practice transforms cultural knowledge into a commodified asset, thereby necessitating the imagination of "counter-futures" to challenge this systemic extraction (Couldry & Mejias, 2025; Eshun, 2003). For African creators, this is vital for moving beyond existing oppression towards a quest for liberation, which digital avatars often symbolise (Sum, Makokha, & Ndege, 2022). Furthermore, the legal environment, such as Kenya's institutional framework, usually exacerbates these challenges due to legislative inadequacies in digital intellectual property protection and persistent allegations that Collective Management Organisations (CMOs) provide low payouts through ambiguous accounting methods (Ojha, 2024).

***f. Digital blackface and cultural appropriation***

The final critical dimension is the ethical risk associated with disembodied performance. Once a dance is digitised, it can be separated from its original dancer and culture. A new form of cultural appropriation, or "digital blackface," is thus possible. For example, a motion-captured dance that is sacred or ritualistic in its repertoire might be used to animate a character in the virtual world of a violent video game without any consideration for or cultural awareness of how this will affect its community of origin (Dancers' Group, 2019). The technology that allows cultures to be recorded historically also enables their rental for vulgar purposes. It calls for new ethical frameworks, possibly drawing parallels with project networks dealing with digital Black dance and environmental experience, such as Digital Black Dance Ecologies, whose focus is on the intersections." (Digital Black Dance Ecologies, n.d.).

## Conclusion

Nairobi has revolutionised the art form of dance through motion-capture technology and social-media performances and has created avatars and virtual environments for performance that redefine the notion of the stage. This research supports the concept of Nairobi-based artists as "Digital Weavers" who have adapted foreign technology to tell traditional stories and record identities within an Afrofuturist context. However, this transformation comes with the very real possibility of severe legal and ethical consequences. There is a vast disconnect today between the legal structure of the global system and the capitalist ideologies that promote individual ownership, profit, and contractual exclusivity. Conversely, the ideology of communal ownership is deeply embedded in African philosophies; thus, songs, dances, and cultural practices are collectively owned and stewarded rather than individually owned and commodified. As dance continues to transition from the communal space to online/digital domains, we will likely see exploitation of vulnerable communities; specifically, the "owners" (the performing artist/community) of the digitised movement will lose all rights due to the financial capabilities of companies to secure copyrights and monetise the heritage data of a community.

To ensure that digital technologies create opportunities for empowerment rather than exploitation, it is necessary to rethink the legal framework governing such activities radically. In this regard, we believe that Kenyan legislation should move beyond the standard copyright model and adopt a model of "Communal Data Rights" or "Heritage Rights" to protect the digital representations of traditional movements from private ownership by entities, whether tech companies or government agencies. Further, instead of simply entering into a contract that transfers all rights of the digital representation of the dancer's movement to the funding agency, the law should require benefit-sharing agreements whereby the community or the original performer retain moral rights and a percentage of the royalties generated from the sale of their digitised representation of their traditional movement(s), in perpetuity. These recommendations are consistent with the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, ensuring that, regardless of how the digital DNA of Kenyan culture is processed using Western technologies, that DNA remains under Kenyan stewardship. Thus, future research must focus on developing the legal language for such protections, as well as conducting ethnographic studies documenting the economic realities of digital dancing in Nairobi, and ultimately bridging the gap between theoretical constructs and the practical protection of artists and artists' communities that are currently vulnerable to exploitation by those seeking to profit from the commercialisation of their intangible cultural heritage.

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