

Economic Rights Advocacy in Bongo Flewa: An Interrogation of Sugu's 'Haki' and Nay wa Mitego's 'Rais wa Kitaa'

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Abstract

Bongo Flewa music, among others, engages with socioeconomic realities, depicting the hardships of life and its consequences to individuals. Nevertheless, existing scholarship on Bongo Flewa has largely overlooked its engagement with economic rights. The current article addresses this gap by examining the songs "Haki" and "Rais wa Kitaa" by Tanzanian Bongo Flewa artists Sugu and Nay wa Mitego. It examines their representation of violations of economic rights affecting ordinary citizens and working-class communities, as perpetrated by state authorities, political elites, and economic structures. The article draws on the intersection of human rights and literary discourse. It particularly employs James Dawes' theorisation of storytelling and Reiner Forst's concept of human dignity as theoretical lenses for analysing these songs as lyrical narratives that articulate moral claims against economic injustices. Through a close reading of the songs' lyrics, the analysis reveals a framing of unfair taxation, inadequate remuneration, and economic exclusion as material deprivation and also as denials of dignity rooted in unequal power relations. The findings demonstrate that Bongo Flewa songs provide a significant literary space in which marginalised groups are represented as agents who contest economic inequality, demand recognition and justification, and reimagine economic equality in a context where formal mechanisms of accountability remain limited.

Keywords:

Agency, Bongo Flewa, Dignity, Economic Marginalisation, Nay wa Mitego, Storytelling, Sugu, Tanzanian Music

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Introduction

At the inauguration of the Criminal Justice Commission in 2023, the then Vice President of Tanzania, Philip Isdor Mpango, acknowledged limited awareness of citizens' rights as a barrier to the realisation of human rights. His remarks echoed findings from Tanzania's Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC), which identified the right to equality as one of the five most violated rights in the country in 2021 (Wazambi & Lugendo 2022). These observations highlight persistent challenges in the protection and realisation of human rights, particularly in relation to economic inequality. Contextually, Bongo Flewa music has become an influential cultural platform for articulating socioeconomic grievances and critiquing exclusionary economic and political structures in Tanzania. Over several decades, artists have used music to address socioeconomic and political issues and to criticise corruption and other inhumane practices. (Sanga 2011a, p. 190). Within this context, Bongo Flewa songs have become an avenue for expressing resistance to or support for state authority, political elites, and economic policies that limit or reinforce access to resources and opportunities. Through lyrical storytelling, these songs raise awareness among citizens and marginalised groups of the lived experiences of injustice and economic inequalities.

Although legal frameworks such as labour laws and anti-discrimination policies exist to address economic inequality in Tanzania, gaps in enforcement and limited public awareness continue to hinder meaningful progress. These conditions have inspired extensive scholarly engagement with Bongo Flewa as a genre concerned with youth resistance, identity formation, cultural expression, and gendered power relations (Suriano 2011; Reuster-Jahn & Hacke 2011; Sanga 2011a; Sanga 2011b; Spemba 2017a; Bwana & Mung'aya 2024). In light of existing scholarship, there remains a notable gap in studies on Bongo Flewa's engagement with economic rights within a human rights perspective.

Notably, Mwakibete (2023) has considered Bongo Flewa songs as critiques of injustice in Tanzania. He focused on their engagement with legal practices, including police brutality, wrongful arrest, and bias against the poor. Although his study emphasises the centrality of Bongo Flewa songs in

raising human rights awareness and shaping societal perceptions of injustice, it approaches economic inequality indirectly. It shows the way poverty and associated lifestyles contribute to negative socioeconomic identities and mistreatment. This limitation raises an underexplored question about economic rights and equality in Tanzanian popular music.

The present article addresses this gap by exploring how Bongo Fleva songs narrate economic inequality as a violation of economic rights, with human dignity and justice emerging as its consequences. Focusing on two songs, “Haki” by Sugu and “Rais wa Kitaa” by Nay wa Mitego, the article analyses the representation of experiences of economic marginalisation and articulates demands for justice and recognition in lyrical storytelling. Rather than portraying marginalised individuals as passive victims, the songs showcase their capacity to contest injustice and assert claims to economic equality. Thus, the article argues that Bongo Fleva provides a significant cultural space for reimagining economic equality and advancing the discourse on human rights in Tanzania.

Conceptual Framework

The article is grounded in economic rights discourse, particularly the right to economic equality and a dignified livelihood. It adopts James Dawes. (2009) theorisation of storytelling and Rainer Forst’s (2011) concept of human dignity for analysing the songs “Haki” and “Rais wa Kitaa.” These concepts enable us to analyse how lyrical narratives expose economic injustice, make moral claims, and express agency among economically marginalised communities.

Storytelling is a vital device for expressing injustice in ways that emotionally resonate with lived experience (Dawes 2009). Dawes characterises it as a paradox: narration can empower marginalised voices but also aestheticise or soften the suffering it exposes. The paradox captures the dual capacity of narrative to serve both as a means of advocacy and as a potential source of harm. The article, therefore, considers storytelling as a contested space in which economic inequality is exposed while remaining aesthetically tense.

To make sense of the normative significance of the claims articulated through storytelling, the article draws on Forst’s concept of human dignity.

He defines it as the right of every person to justification and equal respect as a moral and political subject (Forst 2011). From this perspective, economic conditions that deny individuals fair access to resources, livelihoods, and opportunities constitute both material deprivation and violations of dignity. While human rights provide legal and institutional standards, such as economic rights and the right to earn a living, human dignity serves as the moral foundation for deeming these conditions unjustifiable.

The article treats economic injustice and economic inequality as related but distinct concepts. Economic inequality refers to unequal access to resources and opportunities, while economic injustice describes the systemic conditions and policies that produce and sustain such inequality. The article regards both terms as constitutive aspects of economic marginalisation, which refers to the exclusion of certain individuals or groups from equitable access to economic resources, opportunities, and services, as well as to the devaluation of particular forms of work or populations. In contrast, economic justice and economic equality denote the normative ideal of fair access to the material and socioeconomic conditions necessary for a dignified livelihood (Gorga 1999). The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania (2005) asserts that infringements of this right occur when specific policies or actions deprive individuals of the right to earn a living, as also recognised in international human rights commitments. Economic injustice describes the condition; economic equality represents the moral standard against which that condition is judged. Narration of experienced economic injustice gives rise to moral claims grounded in dignity. Let alone legal redress, such claims demand recognition, justification, and fair treatment.

Furthermore, the article uses the term agency to refer to the capacity of economically marginalised individuals to transform experiences of injustice into moral claims through storytelling. It is the means by which they express grievances, contest unjust economic arrangements, and assert their dignity in the public sphere. As used in this article, agency is evident in the lyrical techniques of Sugu and Nay wa Mitego, where narrative voice and imagery serve as tools of resistance. Storytelling serves as a key medium through which such agency is exercised. It reveals lived economic hardship

through testimony stances that challenge economic inequality and demand change. The approach guides the analysis of the selected songs' use of lyrical storytelling to advocate for economic rights, articulate moral claims grounded in human dignity, and express agency through demands for economic equality.

Methodology and Song Selection

The article employed qualitative textual analysis, treating the lyrics of the selected Bongo Flewa songs as narrative texts and forms of socioeconomic testimony. It focuses on two songs, "Haki" by Joseph Mbilinyi (Sugu) and "Rais wa Kitaa" by Emmanuel Elibariki Munisi (Nay wa Mitego). The songs were selected for their explicit engagement with economic injustice, their strong narrative structure, and their prominence in public debates on economic rights in Tanzania. The analysis also considers the sociopolitical context of their production as an interpretative aspect. "Haki" was released in 2001 amid post-election unrest and debates over civil and economic rights, while "Rais wa Kitaa" was released in 2021 amid widespread public dissatisfaction with taxation policies and the rising cost of living. Their lyrics were accessed through YouTube and translated from Kiswahili into English with attention to metaphor, tone, and cultural nuance. Explanatory glosses clarify context-specific expressions. The analysis employed close reading, focusing on narrative voice, imagery, metaphor, and thematic emphasis, and was situated within relevant scholarship and policy documents.

Economic Rights in Selected Bongo Flewa Songs

Before turning to the lyrical analysis of the selected songs, the section situates Sugu and Nay wa Mitego within Tanzania's Bongo Flewa landscape. Their public personas and histories of political engagement shape their lyrical intervention in economic rights. These artists are widely recognised as activist musicians in Tanzania's Bongo Flewa music scene, known for politically charged lyrics and consistent societal critique. As a founding figure of Bongo Flewa, Sugu's music has consistently addressed civil rights and economic inequality, a stance later complicated by his entry into formal politics, reflecting the tensions between protest art and institutional power (Mbilinyi 2011; Spemba 2017b). Nay wa Mitego is similarly known for a provocative critique of injustice and economic

hardship, a reputation that has led to repeated censorship. Notably, his song “Amkeni” was banned by BASATA¹ in 2023 for being “incisive²,” similar to the earlier ban of Sugu’s “Mfungwa wa Kisiasa” in 2018. These trajectories illustrate their artistic negotiation of cultural protest under state control. The trajectories inform their lyrical critiques of economic inequality, as portrayed in the sections that follow in “Haki” and “Rais wa Kitaa”.

Experience of Economic Inequality in Tanzania: Interrogating “Haki” and “Rais wa Kitaa”

Released in 2006, “Haki” centres the demand for justice by highlighting the economic struggles of marginalised groups, including street children, domestic workers, sex workers, students, prisoners, street vendors, local traders, and artists. Its lyrical narrative exposes the exclusionary effects of socioeconomic and institutional structures on marginalised groups' access to economic opportunities. In contrast, “Rais wa Kitaa”, released in 2021, centres on the controversial issue of taxation in Tanzania, conveying how increased levies on social services exacerbate economic exclusion and burden ordinary citizens. These songs contextualise economic inequality within a rights-based understanding of justice.

Tanzania has been committed to economic equality for citizens through the Arusha Declaration of 1967 and the promises of Tanzania’s *Development Vision 2025* (Sarris and Brink 1993; Potts 2019(Mwaifuge, 2019). However, economic inequality persists, systematically denying vulnerable groups access to economic resources and opportunities. Referred to as economic marginalisation, the violation disproportionately affects vulnerable groups whose lives are socioeconomically undermined. In the Tanzanian context, “Haki” and “Rais wa Kitaa” function as a cultural critique of economic marginalisation.

Sugu, to start with, employs a call-and-response technique rooted in African oral traditions, in which the artist poses a question or statement that

¹ Abbreviation for Baraza la Sanaa la Taifa of Tanzania (National Arts Council)

² See <https://www.citizen.digital/entertainment/tanzanian-govt-bans-popular-rapper-ney-wa-mitegos-song-claims-it-is-inciteful-to-the-public-n324648?utm>, accessed on 29/09/2025.

invites imagined or collective reply from listeners (Clark 2018). Drawing on oral technique, Sugu prefigures economic marginalisation through the perceived rights denial. The chorus, which opens the song, presents justice in a collective claim when Sugu asks, “*wabongo mnataka nini?*” (Tanzanians, what do you want?) and receives the collective response, “haki” (justice). The exchange repeats across diverse groups: street children, sex workers, students, prisoners, street vendors, promoters, and artists. It enacts what Eva Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek describe as the “twinned acts of telling and listening,” in which recognition materialises through being heard and acknowledged (Knudsen and Rahbek 2022, p. 114). Accordingly, call-and-response gives a voice to marginalised individuals and actively produces a shared socioeconomic subjectivity. It further positions the song as both a cultural expression and a human rights intervention grounded in struggles for economic equality.

In practice, groups such as street children and vendors in Tanzania, like elsewhere in Africa, survive through informal, risky, and underpaid activities such as begging and selling scrap materials on the roadside (Riggio 2012; Anangisye 2020; George *et al.* 2023). As Anangisye (2020) notes, these activities provide only a window of survival rather than job security or stable income, reinforcing exclusion from the formal economy. Students (*madent*) confront tuition costs, limited scholarships, and post-graduation unemployment, framing their demand for *haki* as a claim to affordable education and equitable employment. Sex workers (*mademu wa viwanja*) highlight struggles with stigma, unsafe working conditions, and lack of legal protection, pointing to rights to dignity, safety, and fair treatment. Prisoners (*washkaji huko jera*) assert rights to humane treatment, fair trial, and reintegration into society.

The chorus compresses distinct experiences into the symbolic simplicity of “*haki*”. In this light, it creates solidarity while risking erasure of specificity, a paradox that reflects Dawes’s notion of language as at once liberating and constraining (Dawes 2009, p. 406). Sugu reinforces this compression in the statement “*hainilazimu kushika bunduki*” (it doesn’t necessitate me taking a gun), channelling desperation into a peaceful, symbolic demand. The tension reflects the dilemma of narrating injustice without erasing dignity or complexity.

In “Rais wa Kitaa”, Nay wa Mitego brings economic marginalisation into focus by exposing the exclusionary consequences of increased taxation on people living in poverty, preventing them from participating in and making decisions about the economy. He juxtaposes the material gains of political leaders with the rising cost of goods and services. In doing so, the song implies that elite wealth is sustained through the exploitation of the poor. He uses the term *wanyonge* (people experiencing poverty) to articulate marginalisation in terms of class identity entangled with the high cost of living:

Kiswahili

Mafuta bei juu, gas bei juu
Kila kitu bei juu, mtatuua mwaka
huu

(Ubeti wa 1)

Sukari imepanda bei

Luku tozo wapi nkakope?

Nani atusemee, semee sisi
wanyonge?

Wacha niwasemee

(kiitikio)

English

Fuel price is high, gas price is high

Everything's price is high; you
will kill us this year

(stanza 1)

The sugar price has gone up

Electricity, levy: where should I
borrow money?

Who is to speak for us, speak for
us, people with low incomes?

Let me speak for you

(chorus)

Nay wa Mitego constructs a sense of suffocation through hyperbole, suggesting that escalating prices will “kill” the poor, while the rhetorical question “*wapi pesa nkakope?*” (Who is to speak for us?) exposes chronic financial insecurity and lack of access to credit. The question suggests a society complicit in leaving the poor unheard and unsupported.

Nay wa Mitego's declaration that “*Wacha niwasemee*” (Let me speak for you) positions him in the dual role of advocate and a potential gatekeeper. On one hand, his intervention amplifies the plight of marginalised citizens, inserting their claims into public discourse and policy debates (Forst 2011). On the other hand, as Dawes (2009) cautions, speaking for others can unintentionally usurp their voice, substituting the advocate's interpretation

for lived experience. The tension underscores a structural challenge in economic rights discourse, where advocacy can simultaneously empower and silence those it claims to represent. Through direct address and collective response, “Haki” and “Rais wa Kitaa” prompt listeners to participate in a shared moral conversation about economic injustice. The songs’ lyrics extend this concern, as discussed in the subsequent section, which analyses how economic marginalisation reinforces disparities between labour and remuneration.

Disjuncture between Labour and Reward among the Marginalised

The representation of economic marginalisation in “Haki” and “Rais wa Kitaa” extends to a disjuncture between labour and reward. In their lyrical narratives, labour is systematically disconnected from fair compensation. It undermines the expectations that work leads to economic stability and dignity. The narratives expose the systematic devaluing of efforts and merit among marginalised groups through unequal reward structures. However, political and economic elites benefit disproportionately. In “Haki,” Sugu illustrates the disjuncture through the experiences of domestic workers and artists. He adopts a first-person narrative that situates him within, rather than outside, systems of unequal reward. The figure of the house-girl exemplifies the normalisation of labour while withholding remuneration. Through her, Sugu reveals a violation of economic equality, observing:

*Kwetu Mbeya wafanyabiashara
wanashindwa kuvumilia*

At home in Mbeya, traders fail to endure.

*Kodi kubwa bila haki waliobaki
ndioyo wanaavyosimulia*

Excessive tax without justice is what the remaining traders are saying.

Domestic work is acknowledged as labour, but economically undervalued. The word “*hata*” (even) underscores societal disregard for domestic labour, suggesting that Sugu, too, belittles this profession. The rhetorical question “... *mbona hamuwalipi mishahara*” (...why don’t you pay them wages) exposes the contradiction between labour and compensation. Labour is defined by its exchange for remuneration, which evokes “patterns of exploitation and control” (Toivanen 2019, p.48). The rhetorical question exposes exploitation and compels listeners to witness unfair exchange and

reflect on the moral legitimacy of labour relations that normalise unequal reward. This contradiction indicates a violation of the right to fair remuneration and decent working conditions, rights stated in both international and Tanzanian human rights frameworks (UDHR, art.23 & 25; URT, art.23.1-2). In this light, economic marginalisation is reinforced through assumptions regarding which labour deserves recognition.

Sugu extends this critique to creative labour, portraying the artist as subject to exploitation within the music industry. In the second stanza, he laments exhaustion, domination by promoters, and the absence of intellectual property rights: “*sauti inanikauka kwa kufoka/promota ananipeleka anavyotaka/ninachotaka ni haki/bado tunasubili hati miliki*” (my voice is drying out from rapping/ The promoter drives me the way he wants/ all I want is justice/ we’re still waiting for the intellectual property rights). The imagery of uncertainties here conveys both physical depletion and structural marginalisation. The drying of his voice, the sense of being “driven” without agency, and the weary declaration of waiting for justice coalesce into a portrait of the artist, visible only through economic extraction yet denied recognition and protection. These verses dramatise the erosion of creative vitality and personal dignity through exploitation. They situate the artist within the same continuum of marginalisation that includes street children, vendors, and other vulnerable groups. When Sugu insists that “all I want is justice,” he establishes a moral claim, asserting agency against a system that extracts value while withholding rights (Forst 2011; Sunder 2018; Fosler-Lussier 2020).

In “Rais wa Kitaa”, Nay wa Mitego approaches the disjuncture in work and reward from an institutional perspective. As the song opens in stanza one, he contrasts citizens’ labour with the unearned benefits of political elites. He presents public salaries as extracted from collective effort rather than earned representation. To expose societal grievances on this matter, Nay wa Mitego assumes the role of a storyteller, identifying himself first and foremost as an artist, not a politician who glorifies art as a means of defending society. This can be seen in the verses: “*Niliye simama mbele yenu sio mbunge ni msanii/Natumia Sanaa kuitetea jamii*” (Standing before you, not a parliamentarian, I am an artist/I use art to defend the society). By

elevating art to a legitimate mode of public accountability, he assumes the role of a “protagonist” in a story (Meretoja’s 2018). The position allows him to confront the parliamentary authority directly:

<i>Mishahara ya wabunge ni jasho la wananchi</i>	MPs’ salaries come out of citizens’ sweat.
<i>Spika, naongea na wewe kwa niaba ya wenye nchi</i>	Speaker, I speak to you on behalf of the citizens.
<i>Kuna wabunge 19 walishafukuzwa na chama, CHADEMA</i>	19 MPs have already been expelled by the party, CHADEMA
<i>Ina maana hawana chama ila bado unao bungeni</i>	That means they no longer have a party, but they are still in parliament.
<i>Na wanapokea mshahara</i>	And they receive a salary.
<i>Unatuona bongo lala?</i>	Hey, how do you consider us?
<i>Hivi, unatuchukuliaje?</i>	You see us as fools?

Nay wa Mitego’s allusion to the 2021 appointment of expelled CHADEMA³ MPs who continued to receive salaries expose the character of institutional inconsistency in sustaining rewards without corresponding labour. Article 71(1)(e) of the revised Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania (2005) states that loss of party membership invalidates one’s position in parliament. Although the MPs’ political mandate was revoked, financial benefits persisted, raising legal concerns. Sugu uses this example, turning a factual incident into a narrative critique that exposes the propagation of economic inequality through political impunity.

His question “*hivi unatuchukuliaje?*” (How do you consider us?) dramatises the weakness of citizens turning on the powerful. In Kiswahili, the opening word “*hivi*” (hey) serves several communicative functions, including initiating questions and expressing uncertainty (Kibiki 2022). Its use in

³ An abbreviation for *Chama Cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo* (The Party for Democracy and Development), a main opposition party in Tanzania

Sugu's question conveys disbelief, casting doubt on the authority's perception of the people. The accusation "*unatuona bongo lala?*" (You see us as fools?) disrupts assumptions of citizen passivity. Rather than accepting disregard, the lyric confronts authority and reasserts the public's right to recognition. This moment marks a shift from endurance to contestation. It shows the power of storytelling to convert economic marginalisation into a demand for justification.

Across both songs, the gap between labour and reward appears as a structured condition that denies dignity by normalising the unequal valuation of work. The disconnection is further compounded by economic policies, particularly taxation and imposed levies, which significantly impact the cost of living for ordinary Tanzanians, as discussed in the following section.

Burdens of Taxation and Levies

The critique of economic inequality in the selected songs extends to the burdens that taxation and state levies impose on citizens. According to Meenakshi Kumawat (2024), taxation can either reinforce or alleviate inequalities. This perspective emphasises the importance of tax policies and warns of the risk of exacerbating economic inequality. In "Haki" and "Rais wa Kitaa", the artists portray economic policies as tools that disproportionately burden marginalised populations, intensifying everyday hardship instead of promoting collective welfare. The songs' lyrical narratives depict excessive taxation and levies on essential goods as violations of economic equality. Using a provocative tone, they unveil the undermining of material conditions necessary for a dignified livelihood.

In "Haki", Sugu addresses the impact of taxation on small-scale traders. He shows that taxation exerts economic pressure, eroding both livelihoods and psychological well-being. He situates the narrative in Mbeya, grounding the critique in a specific local context:

*Kwetu Mbeya wafanyabiashara
wanashindwa kuvumilia*

At home in Mbeya, traders fail
to endure.

*Kodi kubwa bila haki waliobaki
ndivoyo wanavyosimulia*

Excessive tax without justice is what the remaining traders are saying.

Sugu invokes experiential authority, grounding the story in reality. This choice gains significance when considered alongside his factual profile. In fact, Sugu is popular beyond the music industry in Tanzania. He is an active politician, a former Member of Parliament for Mbeya Town (2015-2020) under the opposition party CHADEMA, and a local businessperson who owns a hotel in Mbeya Town. This verisimilitude transforms facts into fiction and engages listeners with the song, making them feel more connected to the geographical place (Houston 2019).

Sugu's deep-rooted connection to *Mbeya* situates him as an insider whose critique comes from lived experiences. In Walter Benjamin's observation, storytelling derives its authority from experience, whether "what [one] tells from his experience or that reported by others" (Benjamin 1968, p.87). Sugu's reference to traders who "fail to endure" serves as experiential testimony. He avoids naming specific government practitioners or institutions responsible for policymaking, instead shifting the focus away from policymakers. Thus, the reference recasts taxation as a lived economic burden that exceeds local capacity. The phrase "*kodi kubwa bila haki*" reveals taxation as an unjust extraction, rendering financial policy a moral issue that demands justification rather than compliance.

Sugu intensifies this unjust extraction through a tragic example of suicide as an outcome of unfair taxation: "*wengine wanajinyonga na kuziacha familia*" (some commit suicide and leave their family). This frank imagery exposes the psychological consequences of economic despair and challenges dominant narratives that construct taxation as a civic duty. In this imagery, taxation policies reduce individuals to their revenue-generating capacity. Sugu shifts attention from the governing authority to the human cost, portraying the trader as a victim of structural economic inequality.

The tragedy's testimonial quality becomes a collective witness. Through the phrase "*waliobaki ndivyo wanavyosimulia*" (this is what the remaining traders are saying), Sugu presents taxation as a shared experience of injustice passed down from others (Benjamin 1968). This strategy mobilises empathy

while asserting the traders' right to recognition, reinforcing the claim that economic policies must be responsive to those they affect (URT 2005, art. 21.2).

Unlike in Sugu's "Haki," Nay wa Mitego's "Rais wa Kitaa" deepens the critiques of taxation from traders to ordinary citizens burdened by "tozo" (levies) on essential goods and services. The opening rhetorical question in stanza one challenges the legitimacy of these levies by interrogating the notion of public consent: "*nani kamwambia mheshimiwa eti tumekubali tozo?*" (Who told the honourable that we have accepted the levy?) Through this question, Nay wa Mitego turns "tozo" (levy) into a contested issue, exposing a democratic deficit and inviting public discussion on economic and financial governance. It also challenges listeners to reconsider their relationship to state authority as taxpayers rather than as passive recipients of policy.

Sarcasm and regional allusion further distance the government's claim of acceptance of the levy from Tanzanian reality. Whether the consent belongs to "Zambia or Congo," as asked in the phrase "*hapa siyo Tanzania; labda Zambia au Congo*" (no, it is not Tanzania; maybe Zambia or Congo), highlights the disconnection between policy rhetoric and lived experience. Nay wa Mitego indirectly references the then Finance and Planning Minister Dr Mwigulu Nchemba, who mockingly remarked, "*kama kunatokea mtu mmoja hafulahii kujenga nchi yake...ahamie tu hata Burundi*"⁴ following grievances over levies on services such as mobile money transactions and fuel in 2021⁵. His statement elicited mixed reactions, underscoring that Tanzanians were neither consulted nor considered in the arrangements for the levy. Along with this presentation, Nay wa Mitego further presents levies as a source of direct economic pain: "*Makato ni makubwa wananchi*

⁴ See ITV interview with Dr Mwigulu Nchemba, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI_VLh-1a0Y retrieved on 12th August 2025.

⁵ Finance Minister Dr Mwigulu Nchemba clarifying the imposition of *Tozo* (levy) on mobile transactions before mainstream media on 8th August 2021 in Dar es Salaam, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8EnOZrK4QA> retrieved on 12th August 2025.

wanaumia" (levies are excessive; citizens are suffering). Using this declarative tone, Nay wa Mitego asserts suffering as an undeniable fact rather than a subjective complaint. His follow-up challenge: "*Hamsikii au mnapuuza?*" (Are you not hearing, or are you ignoring us?) directly confronts authority, framing silence as moral neglect. Through this confrontation, Nay wa Mitego presents taxation as a question of accountability and respect for citizens' dignity.

In these songs' lyrical narratives, taxation and levies are represented as instruments that exacerbate inequality by shifting economic burden onto those least able to bear it. While these narratives risk simplifying complex financial debates, they nonetheless function as powerful interventions that expose experiences of economic governance at the grassroots level. Through their narrative address, the narratives formulate economic grievances in discursive points of reference. In doing so, they provoke listeners to recognise structural economic injustice and to engage collectively with questions of economic rights and dignity. As they emphasise suffering, exclusion, and the absence of justification, "Haki" and "Rais wa Kitaa" articulate demands for economic policies that recognise citizens as moral agents entitled to dignity and economic equality.

Conclusion

The article has explored how "Haki" and "Rais wa Kitaa" narrate economic inequality as a violation of economic rights and dignity in Tanzania. Their lyrics expose the lived consequences of economic marginalisation, including exploitative labour relations, unequal reward structures, and burdensome taxation. They demonstrate that economic inequality manifests as material deprivation and as a denial of dignity. The lyrics show artists, domestic workers, ordinary citizens, and traders who exercise agency, articulating claims for justice, recognition, and economic equality grounded in everyday life. Drawing on Dawes' storytelling and Forst's concept of human dignity, this article demonstrates that Bongo Fleva plays a crucial role in advancing economic rights. Storytelling in the lyrics mediates between personal grievances and collective recognition. It illustrates Dawes' paradox of representing suffering while extending it to claims regarding economic inequalities in Tanzanian popular music. Similarly, reading the lyrics through Forst's lens of dignity has revealed the power of marginalised groups asserting moral claims when formal

accountability is limited. This analysis contributes to scholarship on Bongo Fleva beyond identity, resistance, and political dissent, to advancing human rights discourse and economic justice. The findings underscore the cultural power of Bongo Fleva to express economic grievances and invite collective reflection. They also suggest the need for further research into audience reception and institutional responses, thereby deepening understanding of how popular music intersects with human rights advocacy in Tanzania and globally.

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