

antropologia e teatro

ARTICOLO

Culture in the Digital Age in Developing Countries: The Case of Madagascar

Tanteliniaina D. Rakotomalala

Abstract – ITA

In Madagascar, la trasformazione digitale offre opportunità ma anche sfide. Il progetto PROM'ART, sostenuto dall'UNESCO–Aschberg, ha evidenziato disuguaglianze persistenti tra artisti, soprattutto di genere, regione e reddito. La maggior parte dei professionisti culturali è concentrata ad Antananarivo, con migliore accesso a infrastrutture, strumenti digitali e mercati, mentre gli artisti rurali affrontano connettività limitata e scarsa formazione. La musica è il settore più dinamico grazie agli strumenti digitali, mentre altre arti restano arretrate. Il divario digitale continua a marginalizzare donne e comunità rurali. Tuttavia, tecnologie come streaming, realtà virtuale/aumentata e intelligenza artificiale possono ampliare l'accesso al patrimonio culturale, favorire l'imprenditoria creativa e aumentare la visibilità internazionale. Investimenti in infrastrutture, formazione inclusiva e finanziamenti equi sono essenziali per democratizzare la cultura e ridurre le disuguaglianze.

Abstract – ENG

In Madagascar, digital transformation offers opportunities but also challenges. The PROM'ART project, supported by UNESCO–Aschberg, highlighted persistent inequalities among artists, especially by gender, region, and income. Most cultural professionals are concentrated in Antananarivo, with better access to infrastructure, digital tools, and markets, while rural artists face limited connectivity and training. Music is the most dynamic sector due to digital tools, while other arts remain underdeveloped. The digital divide continues to marginalize women and rural communities. However, technologies such as streaming, virtual/augmented reality, and artificial intelligence can expand access to cultural heritage, foster creative entrepreneurship, and increase international visibility. Investment in infrastructure, inclusive training, and equitable funding is essential to democratize culture and reduce inequalities.

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, technological advances and the rise of digital technology have profoundly and durably transformed many sectors, including culture. The emergence of new tools such as streaming platforms, social networks, virtual and augmented reality, as well as blockchain, has not only redefined modes of artistic creation but also practices of cultural dissemination and consumption. With the growing and widespread adoption of the Internet and the rise of social media, the dissemination of works and cultural mediation underwent significant transformation. Online platforms, such as virtual galleries and digital archives, have helped democratize access to culture. At the same time, digital arts — combining artistic creation with innovative technologies like artificial intelligence and interactive installations — have emerged, redefining modes of artistic expression and experience.

Today, digital technology has become an essential lever for the promotion, creation, and transmission of cultural heritage, fostering increased interaction between works, artists, and audiences. These innovations have enabled artists, institutions, and audiences to rethink their relationship with culture by facilitating access to works, diversifying formats, and globalizing cultural exchanges. Despite the great challenges we will describe further, developing countries are moving in the right direction, and the UNESCO's 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions seems to offer solutions to improve weaknesses and overcome obstacles related to the digital impact on culture. Some directions are suggested by UNESCO's publication titled *Gender Equality, Heritage and Creativity* (2014), a rich text focusing on the recognition of women and girls as agents of cultural promotion and change within their communities.

Yarri Kamara's regional study zeroes in on the specific challenges faced by African women cultural entrepreneurs within the performing arts (including theatre, dance, and music) and the designer fashion sector. The cultural industries across Africa are predominantly in an early stage of development, defined by a notable low specialization of tasks. Essentially, a single cultural actor often handles a significant portion, if not the entirety, of the value chain, from the initial creative act to final dissemination and promotion. In this environment, individuals who become cultural entrepreneurs or leaders typically begin their careers as

creators (such as playwrights or songwriters) or performers. Consequently, “if there are general obstacles blocking women’s participation in a particular art, then by extension there are going to be fewer women cultural entrepreneurs in that area” (Kamara 2014: 109).

The renewal of the artist’s status in Madagascar received support from the UNESCO–Aschberg programme, which was launched for the first time in 2021¹. As agent and designer of this renewal of the artist’s status in Madagascar, the PROM’ART project includes four components: a study on the condition of artists in Madagascar; professional training focused on artistic professions and ICT across different regions of the island; the organization of a Cultural and Creative Industries Fair that brought together active representatives from Madagascar’s cultural and artistic sectors; and finally, a communication campaign promoting the renewal of the artist’s status.

This research on the link between digital technology and culture was based on the national survey conducted as part of the first component of the project: the study on the condition of artists in Madagascar. The results of the survey revealed the following facts: few women artists responded to the survey — only 18.55% compared to 81.45% men among the 275 respondents involved in the project. Among the 22 regions covered by the survey, the highland regions surrounding the capital had the highest number of artists. Regarding remuneration, 72.22% reported earning around USD 33.32 per performance, while 27.78% earned less. Finally, concerning their position within the value chain, the majority of cultural operators (82.55%) work in the creation segment, with most respondents (79.27%) specializing in the music sector.

Elements of the cultural landscape in Madagascar

Gender inequalities

Women artists face significant challenges compared to their male counterparts, earning less and receiving less recognition for their skills. This inequality limits their visibility, income opportunities, and professional growth. Social pressures and domestic responsibilities, especially in rural areas, further restrict their time for developing skills, including the use of digital tools.

The talent and skills of women artists are often underestimated or minimized for various reasons. Data on women’s education in Madagascar reveal significant disparities between regions. For example, according to the World Bank Group in 2024, the illiteracy rate among women aged 15 to 49 in the Menabe region reaches

¹ The UNESCO–Aschberg Programme for Artists and Cultural Professionals is the Organization’s operational arm aimed at protecting and promoting artistic freedom and the status of the artist, in application of the UNESCO 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and the 1980 Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist.

55.8%, compared to 26.9% among men in the same age group. Some societies consider that women's artistic creation should remain within the domestic sphere, thereby limiting their recognition as professional artists.

Women artists face gender-related threats, including higher exposure to cyberharassment when promoting their work online, which discourages digital engagement. They encounter greater obstacles in accessing funding and lack mentorship and professional digital networks, limiting visibility and opportunities. As a result, women remain underrepresented on digital platforms and in artistic events, with few holding key positions in the digital and artistic industries—sectors often dominated by male artists in festivals and online competitions. According to the UNESCO report edited by Keenan, Nowacka, & Patchett, in an African context where women often have to maintain an exemplary reputation in order not to deviate from traditional norms, approaching financial decision-makers is therefore more difficult for women. Moreover, favouritism and nepotism also contribute to excluding them from the film industry, as access to funding, distribution, and broadcasting is often controlled by elite (Keenan - Nowacka - Patchett 2014).

Obviously, they secure fewer opportunities for international collaborations. Without digital visibility, it is difficult to connect with producers, record labels, art galleries, or international publishers. These factors create financial dependency due to the difficulty of monetizing their work.

With fewer women visible on digital platforms, the cultural industry continues to be dominated by men, perpetuating inequalities. There are few female digital role models to inspire other artists to take the leap. Women artists often bring unique perspectives and diverse styles that enrich the artistic landscape. Their limited presence in the digital sphere restricts the diversity of creations, resulting in less innovation and variety in digital art.

Regional disparity

The study also revealed that most artists and cultural professionals are concentrated in the capital, Antananarivo, due to unequal access to cultural infrastructure. Recording studios, theatres, galleries, publishing houses, printing facilities, and work opportunities are mainly located in large cities. Rural and remote artists face limited means to produce, promote, and sell their work, with restricted access to distribution and marketing platforms. Artistic sales - whether music, books, or artworks - are largely tied to urban markets better connected to national and international networks.

On the other hand, remote regions face difficulties in accessing digital technologies due to low Internet coverage in rural areas. In the same year the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the

Diversity of Cultural Expressions was adopted (2005), research by a Malagasy graduate student indicated that although telecommunication and Internet services were expanding, they were only accessible in cities (Andriambelo 2005). While new digital tools allow artists to sell their work online and access funding, rural areas still suffer from limited Internet and technological equipment access. Even where digital access exists, the high cost of mobile data prevents optimal use.

Many artists outside major cities lack mastery of digital tools. They have not received training in digital marketing, self-publishing, or monetizing content on online platforms. A lack of skills in using social media, streaming services, or marketplaces limits their ability to reach a wider audience. The cost and logistics of exporting works are also very high. Exporting cultural products (books, artworks) from remote regions is more complex and expensive due to the lack of suitable transport services.

Low Income

The national consultation on the status of artists revealed that artists' income in Madagascar is very low outside the music industry. In fact, remuneration levels in the music sector are higher than the minimum wage in force in the country. Local populations in general, and especially those in rural or remote areas, have very limited purchasing power, which reduces their ability to buy cultural products (books, music, show tickets). With household spending priorities focused on basic needs (food, housing, education), culture is perceived as a luxury. Research by Andriambelo shows that "access to and use of ICT depends on individual income, even in large cities. The rate of equipment ownership remains very low in low- and middle-income households" (Andriambelo 2005:41).

In her book *Digital Divide*, Pippa Norris analyzes the issue of digital inequalities through a three-dimensional approach that clearly reflects the situation of a country like Madagascar, where access to technology remains limited to certain segments of the population (Norris 2001).

First of all, the digital divide, according to Norris, is divided into three types of digital inequalities: the global divide, the social divide, and the participatory divide. The global divide refers to the gap between highly connected developed countries and developing countries, such as Madagascar, which lag behind in terms of digital infrastructure. Madagascar faces high access costs, rural areas without coverage, and low fixed internet penetration, which clearly illustrates this global divide. The social divide refers to inequalities within a single country, where certain social groups have greater access to digital technologies. In Madagascar, this divide is evident between urban populations (Antananarivo and other large cities), who have access to 4G,

smartphones, and cybercafés, and rural populations, often without electricity and with limited purchasing power. Finally, the participatory divide, or democratic divide, refers to inequalities in the use of technologies to participate in political and social life, even among those who have internet access. In Madagascar, while young urban residents use Facebook to get information and engage in debates, rural populations and older people are often excluded from this digital participation.

Norris highlights several factors contributing to access disparities, which apply to the Malagasy context. Economic factors, due to the high cost of devices and internet subscriptions, limit access for the poorest. Regarding infrastructure, in rural areas, the lack of stable networks (electricity, mobile coverage) hinders access. In terms of education, illiteracy and low education levels make it difficult to adopt digital tools. Finally, linguistic factors should not be overlooked, as much digital content is in French or English, which poses a barrier for the majority of Malagasy people, whose first language is Malagasy.

Norris (2001) identifies three types of consequences of the digital divide:

- Information poverty: those without access to technologies are deprived of essential information to improve their living conditions (market prices, health information, economic opportunities).
- Political and social exclusion: those without digital access are less able to make their voices heard in public and political debates, reinforcing their marginalization.
- Amplification of existing inequalities: the digital divide widens the gap between connected urban elites and rural populations, who are already economically vulnerable.

Music, the most thriving sector in Madagascar

According to the statistics from the aforementioned study, the music industry is the most thriving sector in Madagascar, ahead of literary arts. Indeed, the music and literary sectors attract a larger number of artists and cultural professionals than other artistic disciplines. This trend can be explained by several economic, social, cultural, and technological factors.

Unlike visual arts or theatre, music is easily digitized and shareable. Social media platforms like Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and streaming apps enable artists to gain visibility quickly and at low cost. Production costs have dropped significantly thanks to technology, with Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) allowing artists to compose and record without expensive studios. Home studios have multiplied, reducing reliance on traditional production houses. Independent labels use digital tools to create and promote music without large

investments. Musicians can record songs at home with simple equipment, while beatmakers and producers compose instrumentals on software and sell them online, fostering a new generation of artists.

According to *Music in Africa*, Madagascar's music industry has grown significantly over the past twenty years, largely due to self-production. Easy access to production tools has transformed the national music scene (<https://www.musicinafrica.net/>, accessed on 17th July 2025). In terms of distribution, digital infrastructure favors individual dissemination over large-scale production. Platforms like YouTube, SoundCloud, Facebook, and Instagram allow artists to share their work directly but do not establish a fully structured production and distribution ecosystem.

Culture meets innovation: unlocking potential in Developing Countries

Digital technology as a bridge to new horizons

These analyses lead us to conclude that the rise of digital technology is profoundly transforming culture by facilitating international exchanges, enabling the development of new audiences, and opening the door to innovations such as immersive experiences, the metaverse, and NFTs. These advances offer unprecedented opportunities for the promotion and dissemination of cultural works.

Digital integration fosters interactions between cultures and allows artists to reach diverse audiences worldwide. Digital platforms (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Spotify) enable audiences from different regions to access cultural content they might never have discovered otherwise. Thanks to online communication tools (Zoom, Discord, Google Meet), artists can collaborate remotely without geographical constraints. Many cultural events are now accessible online, allowing artists from Madagascar, for example, to showcase their work to a global audience without traveling. Advances in artificial intelligence facilitate content translation, enabling creators to reach audiences speaking different languages and broaden their markets.

Evolution of new cultural practices

Immersive technologies like virtual reality and augmented reality could offer new ways to experience Malagasy culture and art. Cultural institutions can provide interactive tours of iconic sites, such as Madagascar's archaeological sites, to an international audience without physical limitations. Artists can organize immersive online performances where the audience interacts as if physically present. They can create 3D digital artworks accessible via VR headsets, allowing viewers to interact with the creations. Oral

traditions, dances, and cultural rituals can be digitized as immersive experiences to ensure their transmission to future generations.

Creative economy and employment opportunities

Monetization is still in its early stages in Madagascar. Streaming platforms (Spotify, Apple Music) are accessible but do not yet generate significant revenue for local artists due to low banking penetration and the lack of suitable payment methods. Online concerts and crowdfunding remain underutilized.

Improving access to digital infrastructure

It is essential to develop digital infrastructure in underserved rural and urban areas. Reducing Internet access costs through subsidy policies and public-private partnerships is necessary. Encouraging the establishment of public digital spaces (connected libraries, digital cultural centers) is also important.

Strengthening digital skills and developing accessible inclusive tools

Governments, the private sector, and civil society organizations should collaborate to provide digital skills training for artists and cultural professionals, such as video editing, graphic design, and online broadcasting. Digital education should be integrated into school and university curricula related to culture. Additionally, creating digital cultural incubators to support young creators is vital.

Addressing the digital divide in Madagascar mainly requires developing accessible and inclusive tools adapted to the country's economic and sociocultural realities. The digital divide, marked by inequalities in access to technologies and the Internet, especially affects rural populations and low-income groups.

Financial support and partnerships

To combat exclusion of vulnerable groups - women, rural and remote populations, emerging artists, and people with disabilities - decision-makers must mobilize partnerships to create an environment ensuring equal access to digital tools for all and encourage the participation of cultural minorities in digital productions. Supporting the mobility of artists and cultural professionals through grants and digital exchanges, as well as encouraging partnerships between tech startups and cultural industries, are also ways to include as many cultural actors as possible within a country.

Clearly, these solutions require investments and significant material, technical, and financial resources to bring about radical changes in Madagascar. Developing collaborations with international partners is necessary. These recommendations align with the principles of the Convention on Cultural Diversity, which stresses the need to adapt culture to new digital challenges while protecting both human rights and the diversity of cultural expressions. As suggested by Fleur Pellerin, every time a woman in the cultural sector is successful it has a ripple effect on others, and this rate is accelerating due to increased awareness of more people, artists, directors, cultural enterprises, the media, non-profit organizations, and so on. However, it is still necessary to conduct a proactive policy, and institutions should work to support “less female muses, and more female creators and directors. We will definitely benefit from the change, both individually and collectively” (Pellerin 2014: 96).

Conclusion

The integration of digital technologies has profoundly transformed the international cultural scene, influencing audience practices, economic models of sector actors, and expectations regarding cultural consumption. Our research has highlighted several major trends illustrating this transformation while revealing persistent inequalities and challenges. On one hand, we demonstrated that although digital technology broadens access to culture, it also deepens existing digital divides. Gender inequality remains a striking reality in the digital sphere, where female creators and artists still struggle to achieve visibility comparable to their male counterparts. Likewise, significant regional disparities persist, as unevenly distributed digital infrastructures limit cultural access in certain parts of the world.

Moreover, the digital cultural landscape is dominated by music, which stands out as the sector most transformed by streaming platforms and recommendation algorithms. However, this predominance masks a deeper problem: the lack of robust consumption and distribution chains for other art forms, hindering their economic development and large-scale dissemination. Our analyses also confirm that digital technologies are changing audience behaviors, favoring more fragmented and instant modes of consumption also in this national context.

Immediacy and personalization have become central expectations, forcing cultural actors to adapt their strategies. In this context, artists and cultural institutions have widely adopted digital tools to meet new consumer demands but must contend with major economic challenges, notably regarding the monetization of their works. Thus, while digital technology is a powerful lever for cultural democratization, it also exacerbates

preexisting inequalities. The integration of digital technologies compels cultural actors to rethink their economic models and distribution strategies, without guaranteeing stable financial viability.

From a broader perspective, these transformations raise crucial questions about the future of culture in the digital age. How can a more equitable distribution of income be ensured within the digital ecosystem? What mechanisms could reduce cultural access divides? How can public and private institutions collaborate to provide a more balanced framework for artists and consumers? These are among the many avenues for future research that will help better understand the challenges and opportunities of digital technology in the cultural sector.

Ultimately, digital technology stands as an essential lever to propel the culture of a developing country onto the international stage. By promoting the dissemination and enhancement of local heritage, it opens new economic and diplomatic prospects while strengthening national identity. However, the full success of this digital transition requires strong political will, sustained investments, and continuous involvement from cultural actors. By combining technological innovation with cultural richness, these nations can transform their vulnerabilities into strengths, affirming their place in the global arena and actively contributing to the construction of a more inclusive and diverse world.

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