

PERFORMING GENDERED RESISTANCE: AFRICAN WOMEN ARTISTES AND GENDER SUBVERSION IN AFROBEATS

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Abstract: Afrobeats has become one of Africa's most visible cultural exports, but its global ascent continues to unfold within masculinist traditions and gendered hierarchies. While scholarship on Afrobeats is expanding, far less attention has been paid to how women artistes negotiate, contest, and revise the genre's dominant gender scripts. This article addresses that gap by examining how selected female artistes deploy lyrics, performance, and visual aesthetics to challenge normative expectations and assert cultural authority. Using a multimodal and interdisciplinary approach that combines lyrical discourse analysis, performance and visual analysis, and Africana womanist theory, the study analyzes four songs: Tiwa Savage's *Koroba* (2020), Simi's *Woman* (2021), Tiwa Savage and Asake's *Loaded* (2022), and Amaarae's *Reckless & Sweet* (2023). The analysis shows how these works interrogate and reframe cultural narratives of female respectability, economic ambition, sexual agency, and gendered silencing. Across the corpus, it identifies a spectrum of resistant strategies, including satirical reappropriation, aesthetic excess, and unapologetic affirmations of sensuality and financial autonomy mobilized to displace patriarchal common sense. The article maintains that Afrobeats constitutes a pivotal site where African women articulate emergent idioms of womanhood, recalibrate gender relations, and claim voice and visibility within a rapidly globalizing musical economy.

Keywords: Afrobeats, African popular music, gender subversion, Africana womanism, women cultural resistance.

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PERFORMING SUBVERSION

According to Cieślak and Rasmus (2012), the term “subversion” is often associated with negative political undertones and broadly refers to acts of resistance aimed at destabilizing or undermining established political and social structures. While established authorities often perceive subversion as a dangerous force tied to revolutionary movements that threaten their dominance, subversion serves as a powerful cultural strategy for creatives such as filmmakers and musicians. It allows for the critique of dominant norms and the promotion of radical or alternative ideals. As Mwedzi (2021) argues, creative subversion can manifest through the deliberate rejection of conventional techniques like the male gaze. By producing media that resists this pervasive visual framework, artistes engage in a form of cultural subversion, challenging keenly planted aesthetic norms and reimagining modes of representation.

However, the term subversion has been critiqued for its conceptual vagueness and overuse. Townshend notes that the term is “so elastic as to be virtually devoid of meaning” (Rosenau 2007: 4), often serving more to highlight the perceived vulnerability of contemporary systems than to offer analytical precision. Rosenau (2007) posits that subversive actions typically fall into three interrelated categories: the creation of front groups and the strategic manipulation of existing political parties; the infiltration of key institutions such as the military, police, and influential nonstate organizations; and the incitement of civil unrest through activities like demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts. Rosenau’s perspective aligns with Maschmeyer’s (2022) analysis, which emphasizes subversion as a strategic alternative to traditional diplomacy, one that aims to achieve outcomes comparable to warfare but with reduced costs and risks. Further situating subversion within the realm of covert operations and characterizing it as an active form of interference in adversarial affairs, distinct from the passive nature of intelligence gathering, Maschmeyer identifies three strategic forms encoded within subversion: manipulation, which seeks to covertly influence an adversary’s policies to serve the sponsor’s interests; erosion, involving gradual sabotage and disruption intended to weaken



the adversary over time; and overthrow, which escalates beyond influence to actively pursue the removal of a government.

In *The subversion of subversion*, Boland (2018) deconstructs the term subversion into “sub-versions”, a formulation that highlights the multiplicity of critical positions instilled within acts of resistance. He argues that this linguistic reframing enables a wide spectrum of critiques, most notably those targeting gender norms, which challenge the restrictive frameworks of socialization. These critiques often expand into broader oppositions against systemic oppression. However, Boland cautions that the broad applicability of subversion risks flattening its analytical value; if nearly anything can be subverted, then all aspects of society and culture become interchangeable objects of critique, each treated as a social construct, framed either as a matter of choice or as an instrument of oppression, depending on the critic’s ideological orientation. Another significant figure who contributes meaningfully to the discourse on subversion is Judith Butler. In her seminal work on gender performativity, Butler argues that although performativity and its enabling force create the illusion of natural, heterosexually constructed genders and subsequently compel or limit the forms these identities can take, but even so, there remains room for subversion. She observes that once sex is freed from its assumed natural interiority and surface expression, it opens up the possibility for a parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings. This, in turn, allows us to imagine the subversion and displacement of those naturalized, reified notions of gender that uphold masculinist hegemony and heterosexist power ultimately, to “make gender trouble” (Butler 1990: 34).

One may thus observe that subversion, at its essence, seeks to destabilize established structures, interrogate dominant norms, and disrupt the status quo, whether through intellectual critique, artistic expression, or embodied resistance. In this sense, art becomes not only a site where subversion is represented but also where it is enacted and embodied. Art has never just mirrored culture; it has long functioned as a vehicle for resistance and radical critique (Roy 2024; Jemiluyi 2025b; Brickell 2005). Throughout history, artists have used their work to challenge societal conventions, confront authoritarian systems, and unsettle dominant ideologies (Jemiluyi 2024). Whether through

visual provocation, sonic dissonance, or the reinvention of traditional forms, art has served as a mode of dissent, one that speaks truth to power, destabilizes hegemonic narratives, and creates space for alternative imaginaries.

Within this tradition of artistic resistance exists Afrobeats, a trenchant form of contemporary African cultural production that blends rhythm, politics, identity, and performance into a global soundscape. Gender remains a relatively underexplored dimension in Afrobeats scholarship, while the genre has attracted considerable scholarly interest (Dasent 2023; Allotey-Pappoe 2024; Ayobade 2024; Rens 2021; Opara 2024). This study fills that gap by examining how West African women in Afrobeats use music and visual aesthetics as tools of gender subversion. By focusing on Nigerian artistes Tiwa Savage and Simi, alongside Ghanaian-American artist Amaarae, the article explores how lyrical and visual strategies are employed to resist objectification, reclaim agency, and challenge the masculinist codes that have long governed the genre. In effect, it positions Afrobeats as a platform for cultural expression that doubles as a contested arena where gendered power is negotiated, disrupted, and reimaged.

Nevertheless, it is important to spell out why Afrobeats constitutes a particularly productive site for this investigation, and three core arguments support this claim. First, Afrobeats has become one of the most visible forms of contemporary African popular music globally, circulating through streaming platforms, social media, and transnational performance circuits in ways that make it a key arena (Dasent 2023; Ayobade 2024). Unlike historically localized genres such as early Nigerian high-life or US-based blues, Afrobeats emerges from and speaks to a twenty-first century, digitally mediated African and diasporic public sphere, in which questions of gender, class, and modernity are negotiated in real time. Second, Afrobeats has been built largely around male stars and masculinist performance codes; from the celebration of conspicuous consumption and “playboy” romance to the routine centering of women’s bodies as visual ornaments in music videos (Rens 2021; Opara 2024). Hence, when women intervene in this soundworld, they do so from within a genre whose dominant aesthetic has often objectified or marginalized them, which makes their strategies of resistance particularly charged. Third, Afrobeats’ emphasis on



pleasure, dance, and sensual aesthetics makes it a pivotal arena in which African women's respectability, sexual agency, and bodily autonomy are publicly negotiated and contested, often in ways that diverge – sometimes subtly, sometimes sharply – from other musical traditions.

In what follows, the article first offers a review of Afrobeats as both a cultural product and a global genre, tracing its evolution, transnational circulation, and gendered dynamics. This is followed by a discussion of traditional expectations and gendered realities in African Societies, which provides a culturally grounded backdrop for understanding how gender is constructed, performed, and contested within African contexts. The next section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the study and the final section presents the core analysis, where selected songs and music videos by female Afrobeats artists are examined in detail.

AFROBEATS AS A CULTURAL AND GLOBAL GENRE

The phrase “Afrobeats to the World” has become more than a slogan to spell a marker a cultural reality rooted in the genre's expansive global reach and growing institutional recognition. Extending beyond mere hyperbole or sensational storytelling, the global takeover of Afrobeats is a reflection of a strategic and sustained reorientation of African music as a dominant force in global contemporary popular culture. Afrobeats has arguably held its position as the most influential form of youth popular culture on the African continent for over a decade (Ugor 2021). Its artistes have become some of the most sought-after performers globally, commanding major stages from the Fifa World Cup and Madison Square Garden in New York to the O2 Arena in London and local neighbourhood events and festivals. Additionally, Afrobeats has found its way into diverse global platforms, ranging from Npr's Tiny Desk concerts and primetime US television to unexpected moments of political solidarity, such as the women's protests in Iran, where Rema's “Calm Down” captured attention beyond anticipated borders and was embraced in a surprising context (Ayobade 2024: 1).

Earlier Black diasporic traditions such as roots reggae often engaged “Africa” through motifs of ancestral return, exile, and spiritual homeland, typically articulated from the vantage point of diasporic communities in the Caribbean, Europe, or North America. Afrobeats, on the other hand, emerges from a different positionality; it is driven largely by artistes living and working in African urban centers, who address both local and global audiences as contemporaries speaking from e.g. Lagos, Accra, or Johannesburg, and not as distant descendants imagining a far-off homeland. According to Ayobade (2024: 2), Afrobeats artistes appear to engage in what Anima Adjepong (2021: 3) terms Afropolitan projects, strategic efforts by individuals and groups to assert their identity as Africans rooted in the continent, its histories, its people, and a shared modernity. This moment, in which African musical artistes unapologetically claim their place as vanguards of global popular culture, presents a timely and significant opportunity for curating critical discourse around their cultural and political impact.

Also significant is the fact that this global resurgence of African music has emerged largely outside the traditional networks of patronage and institutional support that once shaped Black popular music on the world stage. In contrast, from the mid- to late twentieth century, artistic exchanges between Africa and its diaspora were often orchestrated through state-sponsored cultural initiatives, frequently entangled in Cold War geopolitics or advanced under Pan-Africanist agendas championed by post-independence African governments (Murphy 1966; Apter 2005). In any serious discourse on Afrobeats, it is important to clarify the distinction between Afrobeat and Afrobeats, specifically the significance of the seemingly minor “s” at the end of the latter. This small but consequential letter frequently surfaces and recedes in both popular and academic discussions, perpetuating the mistaken belief that the two terms are interchangeable. Yet the distinction and occasional overlap between them is both notable and deserving of clear delineation, particularly in a conversation centered on Afrobeats. Afrobeat (without the “s”) refers to a specific genre with its own sonic architecture, political ethos, mythologies, and diasporic resonances, most famously associated with Fela Kuti and the revolutionary aesthetics he championed.

Afrobeat music, which is a rhythmic fusion of highlife, jazz, funk, and soul emerged as a distinct cultural force in the early 1970s. Characteristically introduced to audiences through live performances, Afrobeat songs are executed by bands composed of skilled instrumentalists, each dedicating significant time to their specific craft. Central to the genre are the band and its charismatic leader, figures who collectively animate Afrobeat's commitment to radical politics and popular struggle. While often celebrated for its subversive edge and revolutionary messaging, a more historically nuanced perspective also highlights the interplay of eroticism within its political expression (Olaniyan 2004: 114). The genre is most famously linked to the late Nigerian icon Fela Kuti, whose legacy continues to shape its mythos. Afrobeats (with the "s"), by contrast, refers less to a singular genre and more to a market-oriented classification encompassing a wide spectrum of African-derived electronic dance music. Functioning as a catchall term, it carries significant commercial weight, what has been described as "a blur that itself takes shape as a new aesthetic form" (Nyong'o 2019: 230).

Artistes and industry stakeholders increasingly tailor their productions toward a recognizably "African" sound, shaped as much by global market demands as by local innovation. The term emerged in the early 2010s and is widely credited to Ghanaian-British radio and television personality Abrantee Boateng, popularly known as Dj Abrantee. He coined Afrobeats to group together West African musical styles that extended beyond specific national genres like Ghanaian hiplife or Nigerian Naija Beats. Abrantee also played a key role, alongside a cadre of diasporic DJs, in ushering African electronic dance music into the British mainstream. As Osiebe (2020) notes, "These proponents insist that the term Afrobeats be recognised as umbrella shorthand that neither disrespects nor diminishes Africa's history and cultural diversity" (Osiebe 2020: 91). Whether conceived as a self-cannibalizing genre-composite or a hypernym (Allotey-Pappoe 2020), Afrobeats embodies a broad and fluid assemblage of musical and aesthetic practices that resist fixed classification. Artistes variously embrace or critique this contested yet generative label, thereby reinforcing its cultural and commercial utility.

In recent years, Afrobeats has evolved into a constellation of subgenres, offshoots, and hybrid forms that reflect regional creativity, diasporic exchange, and experimental sonic innovation. Afro-Fusion, popularized by Burna Boy, blends Afrobeats with dancehall, reggae, and hip-hop to articulate both global consciousness and local realities. Afro-R&B or Afro-Soul, exemplified by artistes like Tems and Wurld, infuses Afrobeats with emotive, melody-rich textures rooted in R&B and soul. The rise of Amapiano x Afrobeats spearheaded by artistes like Asake and Davido has brought the South African log drum sound into Nigerian mainstream pop. Artistes like Shalipopi have carved out a distinctive style fusing street slang, rhythm-heavy beats, and eccentric vocal stylings, sometimes referred to as Plutomania sound, though not yet formally codified as a genre. In northern Nigeria, the emergence of Hausapiano combines Hausa-language lyrics with Amapiano rhythms, showcasing how regional languages and aesthetics are shaping new Afrobeats directions.

Much like hip-hop, Afrobeats is fundamentally born-digital, its songs often debut on platforms like YouTube, Apple Music, and Spotify, where algorithmic circulation and user engagement produce new metrics of value, relevance, and belonging. Rather than advancing a radical political agenda, many Afrobeats artistes exalt the pleasures of ostentatious wealth, romantic and sexual freedom, and conspicuous consumption. Some frame their work as therapeutic, offering a sonic balm for the lived precarity and harsh economic conditions of late capitalism in Africa and its diasporic extensions. While Afrobeat is occasionally sampled or cited through hooks, instrumentation, or explicit invocations of Fela Kuti as a cultural ancestor, Afrobeats largely distances itself from the revolutionary fervor that once defined mid- to late twentieth century Afro-diasporic cultural exchange. Instead, it cultivates a sonic universe saturated with indulgence, aspiration, and individual success. Yet this does not negate its cultural significance. As today's cultural vanguards, Afrobeats artistes continue to affirm the power of music as an affective bridge between Africa and its diasporas (Osiebe 2020: 94). Crucially, they also resist the historical erasure of Africa from global articulations of Blackness, asserting presence, authorship, and aesthetic agency on their own terms and, notably, from

the margins of empire and global capital. These interventions, too, constitute a meaningful and emergent cultural politics.

Additionally, the discourse on gender has become increasingly central to critical discussions of Afrobeats, a genre historically led by Black African men, both as artistes and performers. A cursory online search of Afrobeats music videos readily reveals the genre's overwhelmingly male-dominated visual and narrative terrain. As a result, the lyrics, aesthetics, and broader cultural expressions emerging from Afrobeats often project a distinctly assertive masculine energy, one that shapes how gender relations are constructed, performed, and consumed within the genre. Rens (2021) refers to this dynamic as *misogyrom*, a form of veiled misogyny cloaked in vibrant visuals or progressive gender posturing, yet ultimately reinforcing restrictive portrayals of Black African women. Similarly, Opara (2024) highlights the persistent gender wealth gap in the Afrobeats industry, noting that female artistes not only receive less visibility but also command less commercial power than their male counterparts. Together, these critiques reinforce the value of exploring how female artistes are actively challenging and subverting the male-dominated structures of Afrobeats and the transformative potential of women within a genre historically shaped by masculine narratives and aesthetics.

TRADITIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND GENDERED REALITIES IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Diverse religious, socio-political, and historical forces intersect and contribute to shaping how gender is understood and negotiated. In the African context, gender remains especially contested due to the compounded meshing of religion, culture, politics, economics, class dynamics, and the enduring legacies of colonial rule across many African states (Lindsay, Miescher 2003; Ratele 2006; Mwatsiya 2019). In addition to this complexity, African scholars are increasingly moving beyond Western frameworks that narrowly define gender through bodily performance, instead emphasizing the role of spirituality, cosmology, and indigenous epistemologies in shaping gender identities and relations in African societies (Jemiluyi 2025a; Mfecane 2018).

This shift underscores a more holistic understanding of gender as solidly lodged in cultural, ancestral, and metaphysical dimensions in African societies. Nevertheless, Africa's diverse cultural landscapes encompass a multiplicity of beliefs regarding gender roles, yet there remains a pervasive pattern in which women occupy positions subordinate to men, both in public spheres and domestic contexts. Gender thus emerges as a fundamental organizing principle, profoundly influencing societal structures through culturally constructed meanings attributed to masculinity and femininity. This becomes particularly evident in the gendered division of labor observed across many African societies, where roles and responsibilities are distinctly allocated along gender lines within households and broader communal contexts (Okolo, Nwachukwu 2022). While these gendered divisions are widespread, the underlying cultural rationales and specific configurations of labor roles vary considerably among societies, reflecting historical, political, economic, and social transformations over time.

Gender relations and gender identities constitute fundamental aspects of cultural systems, significantly shaping everyday experiences within familial structures, communal expectations, and workplace interactions (Schalkwyk 2000). Within traditional African socio-cultural frameworks, women are frequently socialized into roles characterized by silence during male discourse, displays of respectability predicated upon deference to men, particularly male authorities, and embodying the idealized role of nurturing mothers to the community or nation. These normative scripts can narrow the terms of women's public voice and constrain their capacity to contest patriarchal authority. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is important to recognize the role colonialism played in fashioning these arrangements. Colonial governance and missionary moral regimes frequently intensified male-centered authority by reshaping legal systems, domestic ideals, and public leadership structures in ways that consolidated men's social power (Oyewumi 2005; Amadiume 2005). Within this broader historical formation, dominant gender configurations in many African societies continue to cast the ideal man as the household's authoritative head and principal provider, responsible for economic provision, family leadership, and the defence of household honor. The

archetype of the “ideal African man”, per consequence, is produced through the intertwining of older social hierarchies and colonial modernities, and is affirmed through expectations of fatherhood and husbandhood organized within a clearly patriarchal framework.

The familial metaphor inscribed in these gendered expectations frequently extends into the political sphere, whereby political leaders are symbolically cast as paternal figures, or “fathers of the nation”. Schatzberg (2001) argues that such political metaphors offer critical insights into how gendered constructs of fatherhood and motherhood have historically been articulated, institutionalized, and leveraged within African political contexts. Furthermore, Schatzberg elucidates how these culturally derived perceptions of fatherhood are operationalized within actual political practices, reinforcing the metaphor of the head of state as a paternal authority whose power is legitimized precisely through appeals to culturally ingrained ideals of masculinity and patriarchal governance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AFRICANA WOMANISM

Africana womanism, a term first articulated by Clenora Hudson-Weems in the late 1980s, designates an ideological and critical orientation centered on the lived experiences, material conditions, and collective needs of women of African descent. It grounds itself in African cultural histories and communal worldviews, speaking explicitly to Africana women as a global constituency and to the empowerment of Black communities more broadly, and is distanced from Euro-American feminist traditions (Ntiri 2001: 166). Africana womanism, as Kolawole observes, emphasizes a “underscores a closer affinity among all African women globally” (Kolawole 1997:25). Africana womanism begins from the premise that Africana women experience marginalization at the intersection of race, gender, and socio-economic position, and that any thorough analysis of their lives must take into account race as a primary axis of oppression (Ntiri 2001: 164). In contrast to mainstream Western feminism, which many Africana thinkers view as historically shaped by the racial and gender antagonisms of white women, Africana

womanism refuses narratives that cast Black men as the principal enemy and instead insists on seeing them as indispensable partners in the broader struggle against enslavement, marginalization, and poverty. From this vantage point, feminism, as it has often been articulated in Euro-American contexts, appears to Africana womanists as a separatist and insufficiently inclusive framework for addressing the specific realities of Africana women (Ntiri 2001: 164).

Africana womanism, as articulated by Hudson-Weems, is organised around a constellation of eighteen interrelated principles that collectively define its ethical and philosophical core. These include self-naming and self-definition; a family-centred worldview; a commitment to wholeness and role flexibility; adaptability and cultural authenticity; Black female sisterhood; a shared struggle with Black men against oppression; male compatibility; the pursuit of recognition and ambition; nurturing and strength; respect and reverence for elders; mothering; and a deep grounding in spirituality (Hudson-Weems 2001). These elements, concertedly, outline a paradigm in which Africana women understand themselves as culturally located subjects whose identities are shaped by communal bonds, interdependence, and spiritual sensibilities, departing from individualist logics. Also essential to Hudson-Weems's project is a rejection of dominant feminist frameworks that, in her view, misrepresent or inadequately account for the realities of Africana women. She argues that feminism, as a historically Western and largely Eurocentric ideology, is ill-suited to grasp core African values such as complementarity between women and men and the centrality of the extended family as a social and ethical unit (Hudson-Weems 1993). For this reason, she insists that Africana womanism is not a branch or subtype of feminism – whether Black feminism, African feminism, or other womanist formulations – but an autonomous ideology developed by and for women of African descent, grounded in African cultures and histories. Its overarching aim, she contends, is to enable Africana women to formulate their own criteria for interpreting their lived realities and to act upon those understandings in ways that affirm their collective struggles, aspirations and desires (Hudson-Weems 1993: 24, 50).

VOICING RESISTANCE: FEMALE POWER AND PERFORMANCE IN CONTEMPORARY AFROBEATS

This study draws from a selected body of four songs: Tiwa Savage's *Koroba* (2020) and *Loaded* (feat. Asake, 2022), Amaarae's *Reckless & Sweet* (2023), and Simi's *Woman* (2021). These songs were carefully selected for their artistic merit and even more importantly because they capture in tandem a wide spectrum of gender subversion in Afrobeats. They reflect different generations, vocal styles, and aesthetic choices, yet all participate in a shared act of cultural defiance which is voicing resistance through a genre that has historically privileged male expression (Opara 2024). What emerges from their songs is a dimensional portrait of African women who are not barely performing in Afrobeats but redefining what it means to be heard within it. The analysis of this study highlights the strategies these artistes deploy to assert agency, challenge patriarchal expectations, and reimagine African womanhood within the global Afrobeats soundscape.

The methodology guiding this analysis is multimodal and interdisciplinary, combining lyrical discourse analysis, performance and visual analysis, and Africana Womanist critique. This approach attends not only to what is said and sung but also to how femininity is performed, how power is embodied, and how cultural narratives are re-scripted across audio-visual mediums. Africana Womanism, with its emphasis on community-centered values, self-naming, spiritual grounding, and culturally specific experiences of African-descended women, offers a fitting lens for examining how these artistes navigate, reinterpret, or outright resist the gendered expectations imposed upon them. It is also noteworthy to mention that the subversive acts performed by these women are not monolithic. Rather, they operate on varied planes of resistance and even in songs that include male collaborators such as Asake on *Loaded*, the analytical focus remains squarely on the female artistes, their vocal authority, narrative control, and visual command.

Sounding strength: autonomy, power, and feminine assertiveness

In songs such as Tiwa Savage’s *Koroba* (2020) and Amaarae’s *Reckless & Sweet* (2023), one observes a defiant reworking of gendered expectations. These works, which do not solely reject patriarchal control, actively construct aesthetic languages through which African women articulate authority, mobility, and pleasure on their own terms, and each of these artistes perform strength not necessarily as domination but even more daringly as deliberate refusal to be contained, moralized, or made invisible. As one of the leading figures of the first major wave of internationally recognized female Afrobeats artistes, Tiwa Savage occupies a generational space that bridges earlier Afro-pop traditions with the genre’s contemporary global form. Her song, *Koroba*, released under the critically acclaimed album *Celia* is a powerful reflection of African womanhood, its constraints, contradictions, and quiet revolutions.

In an interview with Npr, Tiwa Savage revealed that *Celia* is named after her mother, whom she described as a foundational supporter of her musical journey, even in the face of familial and societal discouragement. By naming the album after her, Savage sought to both honor her mother’s resilience and celebrate hardworking women globally, especially those navigating and succeeding in male-dominated spaces (Ermyas and Pierre 2020). In the same interview, Savage deconstructs the symbolic significance of her song title “Koroba”, a Yoruba word meaning “bucket” or “basket”. In her words:

“Koroba” means bucket, or basket. In the context of this record, I’m basically being sarcastic and saying, “Girls get your basket, we’re going to take our share of the national budget”, because these politicians have been stealing from us for so many years and it’s time to retake our share, get the power back, or the money back (Ermyas, Pierre 2020).

Tiwa’s statement in the Npr interview finds direct resonance in the song’s opening lyrics which immediately establish the ironic and politically charged tone of “Koroba”. The first verse, followed by the chorus, reads:

I no come this life to suffer	I didn't come into this life to suffer
If I follow politician	If I go out with a politician
You go hear am for paper	It'll make the news
Them go call am prostitution	They'll call it prostitution
Who no like enjoyment	Who doesn't like enjoyment?
If money dey for pocket	If there's money in the pocket
Shebi na national budget o?	Isn't it from the national budget?
We go blow am like trumpet	We'll blow it like a trumpet
Koroba, koroba, koroba, koroba	Basket, basket, basket, basket
Koro, oya carry am	Basket, now carry it
Koroba, koro, kuru, koroba, koroba	Basket (playfully repeated variations)
Koro, oya carry am	Now carry it
Oya everybody carry your something	Now, everyone carry your own thing

While these lines corroborate Tiwa's earlier explanation, they also reveal her deeper intervention as she is confronting the cultural double standards that routinely condemn African women for navigating the very same structures of power and wealth that men freely exploit. The women who "go out" with powerful men are labelled as prostitutes, while the men involved are often regarded as shrewd or successful. In *Koroba*, Tiwa Savage does not concern herself with defending against such accusations; rather, she reclaims her autonomy and free will, repositioning herself and, by extension, other African women as entitled and independent participants in the very national and political economy from which they have long been excluded. This act of reclamation is effectively interpolated in her repetition of the word "koroba", which has been earlier explained as a Yoruba term for "basket", which becomes an incantatory rallying cry. The phrase "oya carry am" (now carry it [the basket]) is both a command and an invitation, endearing her fellow African women to join her in seizing what is rightfully theirs, to take up the symbolic and literal space they have been denied and it is through this that Tiwa transforms what might be read as passivity or complicity into a subversive affirmation of agency. What is especially noteworthy, again, is her choice of the term basket, which is an object rich in African symbolic and gendered resonance.





Fig. 1. Two merged shots from Tiwa Savage's *Koroba* music video: on the left, Tiwa Savage appears positions herself as the authoritative voice of news; on the right, a group of women dressed in red and armed with color-coded buckets, dance in collective defiance, transforming a domestic symbol into an emblem of resistance and shared empowerment.

In both precolonial and postcolonial African societies, baskets have long been associated with women's labor and domestic life; used to fetch water, carry goods to market, transport food, or bear harvests. It is a feminized tool of survival, care, and sustenance. By invoking the basket in *Koroba*, Tiwa Savage elevates this everyday feminized object into a vessel of political assertion, transforming it from a tool of service into a metaphor of empowerment. In her hands, the basket ceases to be a passive container but becomes an active symbol of reclamation, capacity, and collective movement for African women.

The visual narrative of *Koroba* also powerfully reinforces the autonomy, power, and subversion that Tiwa aims to assert throughout the song. The video opens with Tiwa cast as a news anchor, seated confidently in front of a television screen and dressed in a regal African robe. This opening frame effectively interpolated the tone for the rest of the video and also places her in a position of authority where she is the one delivering the news and not the subject of gossip. The scene soon shifts to a bustling hair salon where Tiwa and a group of women are seen flipping through newspapers, scrolling on their phones, and chatting animatedly about current affairs. As Tiwa sings about the scrutiny she would face if she associated with politicians, the women in the salon subtly gesture toward her, suggesting that she herself

has become the news item in question. In a striking moment of communal empowerment, Tiwa distributes money she ostensibly received from a politician to the women around her, prompting a spirited celebration. The women, adorned in bold, colorful attire and wielding buckets, which is a recurring symbol in the song, join Tiwa in a vibrant dance sequence that blends joy with defiance.

Throughout the video, Tiwa deliberately challenges conventional gender expectations; she dons a series of commanding outfits, performs with expressive and assertive choreography, and embodies confidence in every gesture. Additional scenes depict women actively overturning traditional gender roles such as defeating men in a soccer match, slapping an aggressive male character, and controlling the media narrative, while men appear only as background dancers. In a series of sharp visual metaphors, Tiwa also assumes multiple roles to mock and critique corrupt politicians, further solidifying her command of the visual and narrative space. The video, like the song, becomes a site of resistance where the politics of gender, power, and representation are contested and reimagined on her own terms.

Now, I turn to Amaarae's *Reckless & Sweet* where subversion takes on a markedly different but no less potent form. While Tiwa's critique is bold, ironic, and communal, Amaarae's aesthetic is sleek, sensual, and deliberately disruptive of normative femininity. As a Ghanaian-American artiste who often operates on the edges of Afrobeats convention, Amaarae crafts a sonic and visual universe where gender performance is fluid, erotic autonomy is centered, and softness becomes its own form of defiance. Amaarae's *Reckless & Sweet* opens with a lyrical invocation of self-possession, spiritual grace, and unapologetic indulgence, a subtle and striking articulation of her feminine power:

See my blessings, feel my essence
 Look how I just stepped in
 Please, don't try my patience
 Glory to Lord of mercies
 Gone off the high, I'm surfen'
 Touchin' cloud nine, I'm searchin'
 Don't touch me I get nervous, get nervous
 'Cause I got too much
 'Cause my money gets too long
 Lookin' at me, you get goosebumps

Baby, wanna roll with a rude one
 Say she want money, get her boobs done
 Come to crib, take your shoes off
 Now you wanna act brand new, huh?
 Sure you wanna act brand new, huh?
 Move on
 [Chorus]
 Call me when the money come, come, come, come, come
 Call me when the money come, come, come, come, come
 To the money I'ma run, run, run, run run
 To the money I'ma run, run, run, run run

In the lyrics, Amaarae delivers a riveting portrait of a modern African woman who luxuriates in the full force of her femininity while simultaneously asserting unshakable confidence, personal abundance, and bodily autonomy as the locus of power. The opening line “See my blessings, feel my essence / Look how I just stepped in” is both an affirmation and an instruction as her presence demands to be acknowledged and her success and aura are not incidental but cultivated and intentional. In a cultural landscape where African women are often represented in relation to men especially as dependents or beneficiaries of male provision (Onyenankeya et al. 2018; Anderson et al. 2011), Amaarae radically recenters the narrative. She declares that her “money gets too long”, creating an image of economic surplus and self-sufficiency, reinforced through the song’s chorus, “Call me when the money come”. Here, wealth extends beyond being a backdrop to feminine success; it is foregrounded as a legitimate, autonomous domain of power. Her relationship to money is active and mobile: “To the money I'ma run”, which is, in fact, direct contrast to cultural expectations that valorize feminine patience, passivity, or dependence (Maqubela 2021).

Additionally, the line “Please, don't try my patience” operates as a clear assertion of personal boundaries, signaling that this woman’s tolerance for disrespect is limited and her space is not open to negotiation. When she continues, “Gone off the high, I'm surfen' / Touchin' cloud nine, I'm searchin'”, she frames emotional pleasure and spiritual elevation as intrinsic to her sense of self, untethered from the male gaze or heterosexual validation. This framing repositions pleasure and emotional self-care as tools of liberation rather than indulgence.



Fig. 2. Three merged shots depicting Amaarae at the center of a polyamorous dynamic, commanding emotional and sensual power through gaze, posture, and composition, challenging gender roles and queering relational authority.

Importantly, Amaarae challenges the persistent notion that the female body is public property. Her lyric “Don’t touch me, I get nervous” becomes a moment of embodied resistance, critiquing the assumption that women must accommodate physical access. This bodily sovereignty is further extended when she sings, “Baby, wanna roll with a rude one / Say she want money, get her boobs done”. Here, Amaarae not only indulges in the aesthetics of femininity but funds it and disrupts classed and gendered notions of beauty work. In a world where women’s bodies and what they choose to do with them are policed and routinely subjected to public debate, often without their consent or participation, and even the stigma surrounding plastic beauty for women (Chesney-Lind 2017; Bonell et al. 2022; Morgenroth et al. 2024), Amaarae’s line is both defiant and liberating. By further identifying as a “rude one”, she subverts the expectation that African women must always perform decorum, obedience, or humility, while men are culturally afforded the liberty of brazenness.

Resisting long-standing gendered scripts that equate masculinity with dominance and femininity with dependence (Okolo, Nwachukwu 2022; Schalkwyk 2000), Amaarae actively pursues wealth and freedom as a deliberate assertion of her autonomy, reclaiming the realms of economic power, sensuality, and visibility as essential sites for articulating an empowered African

womanhood. This defiance is also reflected in her choice of the title *Reckless & Sweet*, which creates a purposeful antithesis: she subverts masculine-coded expectations by embracing the so-called “recklessness” of ambition and indulgence, while simultaneously celebrating the softness, sweetness, and sensuality of her femininity. Rather than choosing between these poles, Amaarae embodies both, unsettling the cultural binaries that seek to constrain her. This duality extends into the song’s visual aesthetics, where the music video becomes a further canvas through which her message is sensually and stylistically amplified.

The music video opens with a romantic scene between Amaarae and her male lover where their bodies are intertwined in an intimate embrace. Notably, however, it is Amaarae whose movements are expressive with her arms sweeping fluidly around his somewhat limited movement signaling a quiet dominance in the relational dynamic. This early visual already disrupts normative gender roles by positioning the woman as the more active, commanding presence. The scene then shifts to a compelling triangular composition where Amaarae stands between her male lover and another woman, the two women exchanging a charged glance that suggests romantic tension or intimacy. The man, in contrast, sits passively and gazes into the camera with a vacant, almost docile expression and his presence is muted and relegated to the margins of the interaction. In this configuration, male centrality is displaced, and the camera’s gaze aligns with the women’s tension and Amaarae’s authority, not the man’s perspective.

Further reinforcing this dynamic, a subsequent shot shows Amaarae seated confidently in a chair, with a bottle of alcohol placed beside her; an image coded with leisure, luxury, and command. Her female companion is partially visible, her crossed legs elegantly positioned in the frame, while the man is placed on the floor, literally and symbolically beneath her. This visual arrangement destabilizes patriarchal hierarchies and reorients power toward the feminine subject, with Amaarae at the helm. Amaarae reads from a newspaper titled *Daily Rae*, a fictional publication referencing her upcoming album *Fountain Baby* (2023). The headline boldly proclaims “Repent!” a word charged with moral connotations and placed above a sub-heading announcing her return. The juxtaposition is significant for while the word “repent” evokes traditional, often religious



Fig. 3. *Amaarae occupies the center of power, style, and authorship, visually asserting narrative control and sensual sovereignty within a space that subverts patriarchal norms and gendered expectations.*

imperatives of moral correction (frequently imposed on women), Amaarae's poise, style, and control in this scene suggest no intention to conform. Instead, the visual dares viewers to question who repentance is for and why. Later scenes confirm the presence of a polyamorous triad. In one particularly striking frame, Amaarae sits dressed in all black between her male and female partners, each resting their heads on her lap as she caresses them gently. Here, she embodies both emotional and erotic authority; nurturer, lover, and leader. The costuming in black evokes sophistication, solemnity, and sensual power, while the bodily arrangement; her lovers reclining against her, cements her centrality in both affective and visual space. This final tableau, rich with subtext, solidifies Amaarae's refusal of patriarchal scripts and her embrace of alternative, liberatory modes of love, gender expression, and relational power.

Two key elements emerge from Amaarae's *Reckless & Sweet* that deepen the subversive quality of her artistic expression and resonate with this broader politics of gender performance in Afrobeats. First, Amaarae unabashedly explores sexual fluidity, emotional autonomy, and erotic pleasure while maintaining clear visual and relational dominance. She choreographs the affective and sexual energy around her, positioned

as the gravitational center of desire in a triadic configuration that appears to include both a male and a female lover. The camera repeatedly privileges her perspective and the intimacy between the two women, while the man is often rendered a quieter, more compliant presence, an inversion of the conventional Afrobeats frame in which women orbit a male protagonist (Rens 2021). In a cultural context that may tolerate male-centered polygamy but remains resistant to female-centered polyamory or queer intimacy, this aesthetic arrangement is deliberate in its provocation. Amaarae asserts her right to pleasure and multiple forms of attachment, also to the structural control and erotic centrality typically reserved for men in heteronormative configurations, softly queering the relational grammar of Afrobeats without necessarily disavowing her Africanness.

Second, the motif of media as a site of narrative control surfaces as a crucial thematic thread linking *Reckless & Sweet* to Tiwa Savage's *Koroba*. In *Koroba*, Tiwa assumes the role of a news anchor on *National Cake Television*, orchestrating the storylines and flanked by a group of women who help reframe the sociopolitical discourse. Similarly, in *Reckless & Sweet*, Amaarae sits confidently with a newspaper of her own creation – *Daily Rae* – a title clearly riffing on existing African media outlets such as *Daily Nation* (Kenya), *Daily Trust* (Nigeria), *Daily Graphic* (Ghana), and *The Daily Observer* (The Gambia). By imprinting themselves within the machinery of the media, Amaarae, like Tiwa, take control of how stories are told about women like her, stories that would otherwise be filtered through patriarchal lenses.

It is also worth emphasizing that Tiwa Savage and Amaarae belong to different generational cohorts, bringing intergenerational depth to this landscape of gender subversion. Tiwa, who was 40 at the time of *Koroba*'s release in 2020 (now 45), is a mother navigating public life as both artiste and parent. Amaarae, by contrast, was 28 in 2023 and is now 30, childfree, and representing a younger demographic often described as *alté* or cosmopolitan. Despite these differences, both artistes are actively performing womanhood and subversion in ways that resonate with their respective audiences, highlighting that there is no singular script for being an African woman in music. Their diver-

gent performances make visible the plurality of gendered experience and embodiment, affirming that African womanhood is not monolithic but dynamic, expansive, and culturally grounded.

To include, these expressions, altogether, map onto the conceptual terrain of Africana Womanism, which centers the lived realities, cultural values, and epistemic sovereignty of African-descended women. In Tiwa's satirical critique of moral hypocrisy and Amaarae's sensual assertion of self-possession, we see core tenets of Africana Womanism at play: self-naming, resistance to domination, spiritual grounding, economic agency, and collective uplift (Hudson-Weems 2001). Neither artiste demands validation from patriarchal structures; instead, they carve out spaces of autonomy that are informed by culture, embodied with confidence, and expressed through genre-defying sound and image.

Unwritten laws and unruly women: resisting cultural policing through afrobeats

In Tiwa Savage and Asake's *Loaded* (2022) and Simi's *Woman* (2021), one encounters two powerful expressions of resistance: one that reclaims control over the narrative of female sexuality and public shame and another that critiques the pervasive double standards women face in Nigerian society. To discuss and dissect gender subversion by female artistes in Afrobeats without including Tiwa Savage and Asake's *Loaded* (2022) would be a grave omission. Though it is technically a collaborative track featuring Asake, the song contains a verse by Tiwa that is notably significant and inherently relevant to the concerns of this study as her contribution becomes a space for personal confrontation, where she directly addresses one of the most controversial and gendered public incidents of her career. Rather than acquiescing to silence, Tiwa responds musically, publicly, and defiantly, turning shame into satire and reclaiming control of her narrative. Consider her verse in the song:

[Verse 2: Tiwa Savage]

They wan jot my thing dey go learn lesson Ọpọlọ pọ I dey carry firsti Chorus: T'ọbá se bála, bàla, dem go collecti Èmi da gború Chorus: Ọmọ nà bouncing ah Àwọn blogger blogger t'ó fẹ fi mí gba star Sex tape ò le b'ayé mi jé, níbo? Ìgbadùn kékeré yen Chorus: na who never fuck, hands in the air	They want to copy me They'll learn their lesson I'm constantly coming first If they misbehave, they'll regret it I'm a troublemaker I'm active All those bloggers trying to use me for clout A sex tape can't ruin my life, where? That little enjoyment Who hasn't fucked, hands in the air
Tíwá l'omo t'ón so, t'ón sọ Chorus: T'ón sọ Today Germany, tomorrow na London Chorus: London Money too long, e no get bus stop Chorus: Bus stop Wón ní kín rora, kín Chorus: O dorime Dey wan use dorime finish me for here Chorus: For Orile Dem no dey use me play when I enter shitta oh	I'm the girl they keep talking about They keep talking about Today I'm in Germany, tomor- row I'm in London My money is plentiful, it has no end They keep telling me to tread cautiously I am being overwhelmed by lav- ish partying In Orile They don't mess with me when I step into Shitta

There are a few things to dissect in Tiwa Savage's verse as several of her lines are charged with defiance, cultural commentary, and a refusal to be disciplined by the patriarchal codes that "govern" public womanhood in Nigerian society. From the outset, Tiwa constructs herself as unruly and untamed, drawing on the Yoruba phrase "Èmi da gború", which literally translates as, "I am the one who scatters the gathering". This declaration



of self refuses compliance and polite containment and it is one that unsettles the social demand for feminine reservation and quietude. This assertion of unruliness becomes even more potent when she sings, “Dem no dey use me play when I enter Shitta oh”. Shitta, a neighborhood located beneath the bridge near the Teslim Balogun Stadium in Surulere, Lagos, is widely known as a high-risk zone, especially at night. It is associated with street culture, informal economies, and, notably, a visible presence of smokers and touts. For Tiwa to claim that she commands respect and even fear in such a space is to insert herself into a domain of masculine-coded street credibility, a performative geography of power of a woman asserting that her name carries weight, not only in concert halls or corporate brand spaces, but in zones coded as hypermasculine, urban, and chaotic. In other words, she performs a cross-territorial power that defies spatial and gendered boundaries. Her assertion of unruliness is also paired with claims of financial and global mobility, as she sings:

Today Germany, tomorrow na London
 Money too long, e no get bus stop

Here, Tiwa presents her wealth not simplistically as a material possession, but more importantly, as a symbol of freedom; the freedom to move, to choose, and to transcend limitations. Her line “e no get bus stop” metaphorically suggests that her wealth is boundless, without interruption or restriction. This assertion is especially significant in a genre like Afrobeats, where women are frequently subjected to narratives that diminish their economic agency or imply that their success is contingent upon male sponsorship. As Opara observes: “Women artistes appear to face heightened scrutiny, resulting in unequal wealth distribution [...]. Consumers of Afrobeats hold distinct expectations for each artiste based on gender” (Opara 2024: 128). Tiwa’s declaration affirms that her financial power is self-authored and untethered from patriarchal dependence. Furthermore, that some people told her “kín rora, kín rora, kín rora” (to be careful / to tone it down) only reinforces the anxiety around women who exceed the boundaries of social decorum. But Tiwa responds to this cautionary tone with “Ò dorímé”.

“Dorime”, popularized by the 1996 Eurodance song *Ameno* by Era, has become a viral and symbolic anthem in Nigerian nightlife, particularly within clubs and luxury lounges. It typically plays during bottle service rituals, where men spend extravagantly on drinks to assert wealth and masculinity. In social media culture, “Dorime” has come to signal opulence, hype, and spectacle, almost always linked to men. Tiwa, however, reclaims this performative masculinity. She aligns herself not with the restrained or submissive woman but with the high-roller, the one “balling” in places like Orile, another Lagos neighborhood with a reputation for being gritty, unpredictable, and socially stratified. Her invocation of “Dorime” in Orile signals a powerful re-territorialization of elite performance; luxury is no longer confined to the highland Lekki lounges, it is being re-scripted by a woman from the ground up, and on her own terms.

Still, the most searing part of her verse is her reference to the 2021 sex tape leak, an incident that triggered widespread backlash, moral policing, and media frenzy. For Tiwa, this event was especially devastating not only because she is a prominent female artiste but because she is a mother raising a son nearing adolescence. In a hyper-conservative, patriarchal society, the expectations for women, especially mothers, are suffocating. While her artistry may have previously made room for boldness, this scandal attempted to redefine her by a single private act, leaked without her consent. The cultural stakes were, in fact, high as her respectability, motherhood, reputation, and womanhood all seemed at risk. Her response in *Loaded*, however, is so powerful, given that she does not apologize, rationalize or even defend herself. Instead, she sings:

Sex tape ò le b'ayé mi jé, níbo?	A sex tape can't ruin my life, where?
Ìgbadùn kékeré yen	That little enjoyment
Chorus: na who never fuck, hands in the air	Who hasn't fucked, hands in the air

Tiwa's line is bold, shocking, and utterly subversive. In a society where sexual respectability is weaponized against women and rarely against men, Tiwa seizes control of the nar-

rative and turns judgment into satire, using her lyric to challenge the hypocrisy of a society where sexual behavior is universal but punishment is gendered. For context, just a year after Tiwa's tape was leaked, popular Afrobeats male singer Oxlade faced a similar scandal. However, rather than facing ruin, Oxlade later stated in a Hits FM interview that the leak actually boosted his career, helping him reach new audiences (Vaultz News 2023). His experience was interpreted as a rite of passage, even a mark of virility. This blatant double standard is precisely what Tiwa Savage seeks to dismantle in *Loaded*. She refuses shame. She refuses silence. She lets her voice become the site of reclamation. By naming the incident on her own track, she re-narrativizes it not as a scar but as part of her journey. If male artistes can enjoy cultural forgiveness and even celebration, why should women be crucified for participating in the same acts? Tiwa's verse affirms that sex is not and should not be shameful, that mothers are not defined by sexual purity, and that a woman's worth cannot be undone by a private moment weaponized against her. Thus, her musical verse transforms to a manifesto of resistance that boldly declares that African womanhood, in all its complexity, cannot be constrained by the demands of patriarchal respectability.

Speaking of patriarchy and the cultural policing of women, Simi's *Woman* emerges as one of the most direct and unflinching womanist anthems in contemporary Afrobeats critiquing deeply entrenched societal expectations and the gendered double standards that women in African societies confront daily. What makes this track particularly intriguing is Simi's strategic incorporation of Afrobeat icon Fela Kuti's sonic and thematic legacy, a bold choice that transforms her critique into a dialogue with one of Africa's most influential, yet also fundamentally patriarchal, cultural figures. Fela Anikulapo Kuti, often hailed as the father of Afrobeat, was a Nigerian musical revolutionary known for his political activism and fierce criticism of colonialism, military dictatorship, and social hypocrisy. However, despite his progressive politics, Fela's stance on gender, especially in songs like *Lady* (1972), often reinforced traditional patriarchal norms. In *Lady*, for instance, Fela derides African women who embrace Western feminist ideals, mocking them for rejecting submissiveness and traditional female roles.

In *Woman*, Simi also references Fela's *Shuffering and Shmiling* (1977), which critiqued Nigerians' passive endurance of hardship. She uses this to spotlight the similar endurance expected of women, who are told to suffer on earth and "enjoy in heaven". This religiously-inflected logic of suffering is a potent cultural trope used to condition women into submission, patience, and silence. Additionally, her reference to *Water No Get Enemy* (1975), a track that extolled the indispensability of water, is flipped to affirm women's nonnegotiable essentiality, yet underappreciated, role in society. By sampling and recontextualizing Fela's music, Simi both pays homage and subverts. She challenges the very foundations of the gendered ideologies Fela espoused and flips the script to empower the very women he satirized. Simi's invocation of these three songs is also a critical repurposing of cultural memory that both validates and radicalizes her message, and the entire track is a compendium of realities African women are made to live with; pressures to marry, bear children, submit, and remain financially dependent. Let us consider the song's lyrics:

[Verse 1]

Woman don suffer o, l'òwó everybody Suffer suffer for world Chorus: Amen enjoy for heaven	Women have suffered, at the hands of everyone Enduring suffering on earth With the promise of reward in heaven
Man e no like woman woman no like woman	Men don't like women And women don't like their fel- low women
She no be like water, e no get enemy If woman never marry o Chorus: then she no be woman	She's not treated like water, which no one can reject If a woman hasn't married She is not considered a real woman
If woman never carry omo Chorus: then she no be woman	If a woman hasn't had a child yet She is not considered a real woman
If she no get man for side o, dem go dey push woman aside o,	If she no man by her side She will be dismissed and invali- dated

And eventually o,
 Chorus: dem go suffer suffer She gets mistreated
 woman
 [Chorus]
 I never talk finish... I've not stopped talking
 Woman Woman Woman
 Nobody be like woman No one compares to a woman

[Verse 2]

Na so so submission oh All we hear is submission here
 and there
 Se we get assignment Who gave us a homework
 Suffer suffer for world Enduring suffering on earth
 Chorus: Amen
 Enjoy for heaven With the promise of reward in
 heaven
 But you no pay attention oh But you didn't pay attention
 To the intimidation she dey You ignore the oppression she
 face endures
 No be like water, e no get She's not treated like water,
 enemy which no one can reject
 If woman get confidence oh If a woman is confident
 Chorus: then she no be She is not considered a real
 woman woman
 Woman get money If a woman is rich
 Won l'asewo ni She is called a prostitute
 Chorus: She no be woman She is not considered a real
 woman woman
 If she no get man for side o, If she has no man by her side
 dem go dey push woman She will be dismissed and invali-
 aside o, dated
 And eventually o,
 Chous: dem go suffer suffer She gets mistreated
 woman

Simi's verses are as clear as day and so too are her messages. In the first verse, Simi registers the pervasive suffering of women as a normalized cultural expectation and a rite of passage into perceived virtue. This suffering, elastic and borderless, becomes a measuring stick for feminine virtue where the more a woman endures, the more "woman" she becomes. This normalization of endurance closely aligns with what Jemiluyi

(2025c) conceptualize as “toxic womanhood”, a gendered ethic in which patriarchal harm is reframed as feminine virtue and “good womanhood” is measured by how much pain a woman can absorb without rupture, “In performing toxic womanhood, women are socialized to accept infidelity, emotional abandonment, and even violence as unfortunate but tolerable aspects of womanhood and marital life, or as parts of “marital learning” that foster maturity” (Jemiluyi 2025c: 3). To include, Simi critiques the way society predicates womanhood on biological and marital benchmarks. A woman who has not married or borne children is deemed incomplete. This reflects a deep-rooted cultural logic prevalent in many African societies, where motherhood and marriage are seen as rites of passage and the very conditions for social worth (Maqubela 2021).

In the second verse, Simi intensifies her critique by turning to the burden of submission. “Na so so submission oh, se we get assignment” is both a question and an exasperated declaration, questioning why submission must be a woman’s lifelong assignment. Here, Simi critiques how men are exempt from these expectations, while women are taught to contort themselves into socially acceptable versions of humility. Her pointed lines, “If woman get confidence oh, then she no be woman” suggest that even confidence, a trait celebrated in men, is read as deviance in women. A woman who is assertive, self-assured, or outspoken, perhaps even someone like Simi herself who is confidently outspoken, is likely to face backlash for transgressing the boundaries of socially acceptable and expected femininity. And when she adds, “Woman get money, won a l’asewo ni” (a wealthy woman is labelled a prostitute), she exposes how female economic independence is met with suspicion, moral panic, or outright slander. In this worldview, a woman is never simply enough as her worth is endlessly deferred until she acquires a husband, a child, and a docile demeanor.

Yet while Simi’s verses are sharp, direct, and emotionally resonant, it is the chorus that delivers the song’s most profound feminist invocation. Borrowing the phrase “I never talk finish” from Fela Kuti’s repertoire where it signaled ongoing political agitation, Simi seizes the discursive space historically occupied by men and transforms it into a matriarchal proclamation. She speaks not only for herself but on behalf of women everywhere,



Fig. 4. *Simi sits on a throne flanked by women in militant red attire, commanding a matriarchal space of power and solidarity – visually asserting female leadership and resistance.*

asserting that the conversation on gender oppression is far from over, and her declaration of the phrase signals a refusal to be silenced or dismissed. And even as she critiques, she also celebrates, singing “Woman, woman, woman, nobody be like woman” as an affirmation of collective strength, resilience, and brilliance, and at the same time, a call to revalue women, not for what they suffer, but for who they are.

This critique and women celebration is also vividly brought to life in the music video, which extends the song’s feminist ethos through visual storytelling. The video is visually dominated by women, with not a single man appearing throughout, which is a deliberate reversal of the male-centered gaze so prevalent in Afrobeats videos (Rens 2021). Women of all skin tones, body types, and backgrounds are seen dancing, working, and flourishing, rendering visible the diversity of African womanhood. Simi herself sits regally on a throne, whip in hand, dressed in a commanding outfit, evoking symbolic authority as she is not the one being ruled; she is the one who rules. Behind her, women in red stand like sentinels – her feminine guards – protecting the space she claims. Several banners behind them boldly declare, “Women Women Women Women for all Womankind”, echoing the song’s call for unity and collective affirmation and women agency. This visual environment becomes a matriarchal utopia, a space where women exist without



Fig. 5. A celebration of African womanhood reclaimed, three generations of women plait hair in a symbolic act of continuity and care, their white attire evoking purity, dignity, and the enduring grace of femininity.

male surveillance or control. One of the most tender and symbolic images appears as three generations of women sit in a line, plaiting one another's hair; the eldest plaiting the middle woman's, who in turn plaits the youngest's, while the child carefully braids the hair of her doll. This scene represents women's care, continuity, and cultural inheritance. Here, Simi reminds us that the future is also being braided, passed down hand-to-hand, strand by strand, from mother to daughter, from song to listener.

In essence, *Woman* and its accompanying visuals are African womanist in both spirit and structure. Simi's critique is grounded in lived experience, cultural specificity, and a commitment to communal uplift. She engages motherhood and tradition as meaningful institutions while exposing the ways they have been weaponized to curtail women's autonomy. Her call for respect speaks to African women in African societies, drawing on local idioms and situated injustices. The song calls for gender roles to be reimagined on terms defined by African women themselves, without demanding their wholesale erasure. This configuration of holding on to culture while refusing its toxic demands captures a broader tendency in contemporary women's Afrobeats to negotiate, rather than abandon, African womanhood.

It is also important to note that, although this article focuses on a small corpus of four tracks, these songs crystallize recurring

preoccupations within the wider work of the artistes under consideration. Tiwa Savage, for instance, has consistently centered women’s strength, economic aspiration, and social vulnerability across her catalogue. Beyond her already noted 2020 album *Celia* – explicitly framed as a tribute to her mother and to “powerful women” navigating male-dominated spaces and celebrating women’s resilience and leadership (Ermyas, Pierre 2020) – she has also engaged in public activism. Most notably, she has used her platform to protest sexual violence and launched the We Are Tired initiative against rape crisis, extending this gender-conscious stance beyond the studio into overtly political terrain (Louis 2020). Likewise, Simi’s interventions have been continuous and not episodic. Throughout her career, she has consistently advocated for gender equality and contested sexist narratives. She has spoken about the vitality of feminism in Nigeria, taking to her X account to write:

Feminism makes many men feel so vulnerable, because you find that society that gave you your superiority card is starting to know (and want) better for women – and you donno wtf to do. Lol Gag is, if you support us, life is better for everyone. Don’t be afraid (Linda Ikeji 2020).

Simi has also consistently used the same platform to highlight the challenges women face in the music industry and to defend female artistes in situations where she observes that women are insufficiently protected (Soyoye 2021). Her subsequent releases, such as *Woman to Woman* (2025), extend this trajectory in her musical practice, explicitly encouraging women to reject limitations and embrace self-worth as a political act, and singing the praises of women as “one in a billion”, “queens”, and “visions”, which feminist critics describe as “an anthem of self-love, confidence, and resilience, encouraging women to embrace their worth and reject societal limitations” (Nfm 2025). Amaarae’s work also reveals a sustained politics of subversion that runs through, and continues after, *Reckless & Sweet*. Across Fountain Baby and her earlier releases, she purposefully pushes against normative expectations of African womanhood through sonic experimentation, androgynous or hyper-stylized fashion, and the centering of Black women’s pleasure. Amaarae has noted that she seeks to “present Black

women as deities” in her projects (Sotire 2021), and she has emphasized that her music and visuals are intentionally crafted to represent those who are underrepresented and disrespected in society (Mms 2021). These commitments, in tandem, position her work as a sustained effort to foreground marginalized African feminine subjectivities and to reimagine African women’s agency in contemporary popular music.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the ways in which contemporary female Afrobeats artistes strategically engage in gender subversion, challenging pervasively rooted patriarchal norms through their lyrical and visual expressions. By analyzing four significant tracks, Tiwa Savage’s *Koroba* (2020), Amaarae’s *Reckless & Sweet* (2023), Tiwa Savage and Asake’s *Loaded* (2022), and Simi’s *Woman* (2021), the study illuminated diverse forms of resistance employed by African women in the global cultural industry of Afrobeats. Each artiste showcased distinct yet interconnected strategies: Tiwa Savage utilized irony and satire to critique societal double standards around female respectability; Amaarae embraced sensuality, fluidity, and economic empowerment as radical acts of self-definition; and Simi provided a direct feminist critique of oppressive gender expectations and burdens placed on African women.

Guided by Africana Womanism as its theoretical framework, the analysis revealed how these artistes actively resisted patriarchal domination by asserting self-naming, community-centeredness, spiritual and economic autonomy, and collective uplift. In doing so, they highlighted the pluralistic nature of African womanhood, demonstrating that gendered resistance within Afrobeats is neither monolithic nor uniform, but very much nuanced and culturally specific. Significantly, the study repositioned Afrobeats as a dynamic, politically charged cultural arena where African women assert their voices, reshape gender narratives, and challenge masculinist paradigms, hence, pushing its boundaries as a locus of entertainment. The article thus contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions about gender, cultural production, and popular music by illuminating how African



women strategically navigate and transform historically male-dominated spaces.

However, there remains ample opportunity for further research. Future studies might examine how female Afrobeats artistes navigate global cultural exchanges and diasporic identities, particularly in interactions with Western music industries and audiences. Additionally, exploring audience reception to gather how these performances of gender subversion resonate or clash with various cultural contexts could offer valuable insights into the global circulation of African feminist and womanist ideals. Lastly, comparative analyses between Afrobeats and other African musical genres could provide broader understandings of how gender politics and feminist strategies operate across diverse musical landscapes in Africa and the diaspora.

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