

Crisis awareness and the awareness–preparedness paradox in Zambia's tourism industry

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ABSTRACT

Tourism destinations in sub-Saharan Africa face intensifying multidimensional crises, including climate-induced natural disasters, energy insecurity, health pandemics, and macroeconomic volatility. Despite growing scholarly attention to crisis management, the literature reveals a persistent gap between what tourism stakeholders know about crises and what they actually do to prepare for them. This study investigates the awareness–preparedness paradox in Zambia's tourism industry, a structural condition in which near-universal crisis awareness coexists with critically inadequate operational preparedness. This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks that together provide the conceptual architecture for understanding the awareness–preparedness paradox. The first is crisis management theory as synthesised by Faulkner and extended by Ritchie and Jiang and Faulkner's tourism disaster management framework. Using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, quantitative data were collected from 137 respondents through stratified purposive sampling across five stakeholder categories — government institutions, private sector tourism operators, community-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, and tourists — drawn from Livingstone, Lusaka, South Luangwa National Park, and Kafue National Park. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, one-sample t-tests, Pearson correlation, and Mann-Whitney U tests; qualitative data were generated through key informant interviews and thematic analysis. Findings reveal a composite crisis awareness mean of 4.58 out of 5.0 ($t = 44.09$, $p < 0.001$), significantly above neutral, contrasted with a preparedness capacity mean of 2.98 ($t = -0.40$, $p = 0.689$), statistically indistinguishable from doing nothing. This produces a composite awareness–preparedness gap of 1.60 points, most pronounced for natural disasters ($\Delta = -1.95$) and pandemics ($\Delta = -1.95$). The paradox reflects institutional fragmentation, inadequate resource allocation, and absent policy enforcement mechanisms rather than ignorance of risk, indicating that these systemic issues hinder effective crisis management in the tourism sector. The study concludes that Zambia's challenge in managing tourism crises is fundamentally institutional: governance reform, mandatory preparedness requirements, and dedicated resilience financing are the priority interventions for resolving the paradox and building sustainable sector resilience. This study recommended that the Ministry of Tourism and Arts should mandate formal crisis management planning for all registered tourism enterprises, with ZTA providing technical support and monitoring compliance.

Keywords: Crisis Awareness, Crisis Management, Natural Disasters, Preparedness Paradox, Tourism Resilience, Zambia

I. INTRODUCTION

The global tourism industry is among the most crisis-prone economic sectors, owing to its deep interdependence with environmental stability, geopolitical order, public health systems, and macroeconomic conditions. Over the past two decades, the sector has been exposed to an escalating sequence of disruptions including the September 11 terrorist attacks, the 2003 SARS epidemic, the 2008 global financial crisis, and, most profoundly, the COVID-19 pandemic, which the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021) recorded as reducing international tourist arrivals by 74% in 2020. In sub-Saharan Africa, these global shocks are compounded by region-specific vulnerabilities including recurrent climate-induced natural disasters, chronic energy insecurity, and macroeconomic fragility, creating a layered crisis landscape that distinguishes the region from tourism destinations in more developed economies (Saarinen et al., 2022; African Development Bank, 2020).

Zambia exemplifies these compounded vulnerabilities. The country's tourism industry, which contributed 9.9 percent to Gross Domestic Product [GDP] in 2022 and generated close to 489,700 jobs in 2019 before declining sharply to 340,100 in 2020, has been subjected to a succession of destabilising shocks (Ministry of Tourism Zambia, 2022b; World Travel & Tourism Council [WTTC], 2022). These include the 2018–2019 drought that depleted Victoria Falls, the country's flagship attraction; the chronic load-shedding crisis driven by dependence on hydropower that accounts for over 85% of national electricity supply; and the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused an estimated USD 800 million

in tourism revenue losses and put approximately 80% of sector jobs at risk in 2020 alone (World Bank, 2020b; WTTC, 2022; Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2021).

The distinction between crisis awareness and crisis preparedness is analytically critical and practically consequential. Awareness refers to a cognitive state: the recognition that a crisis threat exists, understanding of its potential magnitude, and knowledge of how similar events have previously unfolded (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). Preparedness, by contrast, is an operational condition requiring documented crisis plans, trained staff, tested response protocols, insurance coverage, resource reserves, and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms (Coombs & Laufer, 2018; Bundy et al., 2017). These are fundamentally different capabilities. The crisis management literature documents numerous cases in which high awareness has failed to produce preparedness due to structural barriers including resource constraints, institutional fragmentation, political prioritisation failures, and the absence of binding policy mandates (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Paraskevas & Arendell, 2007).

This study addresses the awareness–preparedness paradox directly by investigating whether Zambia's tourism stakeholders exhibit the structural asymmetry documented in global literature: high crisis awareness paired with critically inadequate operational preparedness. The research contributes to a body of evidence that is disproportionately concentrated in developed-world tourism contexts (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Gössling et al., 2020) and responds to calls for empirically grounded, context-specific crisis management research from sub-Saharan Africa (Saarinen et al., 2022). Beyond its academic contribution, the study generates policy-relevant findings with direct implications for the Ministry of Tourism and Arts, the Zambia Tourism Agency (ZTA), the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit (DMMU), and private sector operators seeking to build sustainable operational resilience.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Zambia's tourism industry has demonstrated a consistent inability to translate experience of crisis events into institutional preparedness. Despite repeated exposure to natural disasters, energy crises, pandemics, and economic shocks over the past decade, the sector lacks formalised crisis management frameworks applicable at the enterprise level, functional early warning systems, sector-specific insurance mechanisms, and the inter-institutional coordination infrastructure necessary for systemic crisis response (Ministry of Tourism Zambia, 2022a; World Bank, 2011). This preparedness deficit persists even as stakeholder awareness of crisis threats remains demonstrably high, creating what this study terms the awareness–preparedness paradox. The problem is compounded by the absence of empirical research specifically investigating this paradox within the Zambian tourism context. Existing crisis management literature from Africa tends to aggregate findings across diverse sectors and country contexts, limiting the specificity of its implications for Zambia's tourism governance architecture. This study addresses this gap through a targeted empirical investigation of the paradox structure, its crisis-type-specific manifestations, and its institutional underpinnings.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To quantify crisis awareness levels across four primary crisis categories among Zambia's tourism stakeholders;
- ii. To assess operational preparedness capacity and establish the magnitude of the awareness–preparedness gap;
- iii. To examine the inferential statistical relationships between awareness and preparedness; and
- iv. To identify the institutional mechanisms responsible for the observed paradox and propose evidence-based interventions for its resolution.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical frameworks that together provide the conceptual architecture for understanding the awareness–preparedness paradox. The first is Crisis Management Theory as synthesised by Faulkner (2001) and extended by Ritchie and Jiang (2019). Faulkner's Tourism Disaster Management Framework distinguishes six temporal phases of crisis management — pre-event, prodromal, emergency, intermediate, long-term recovery, and resolution — and posits that effective crisis management requires proactive engagement across all phases rather than reactive response to the emergency phase alone. Ritchie and Jiang's (2019) systematic review of tourism crisis management literature spanning two decades confirms that institutional failure rather than awareness deficit is the primary driver of inadequate preparedness across diverse tourism contexts.

The second theoretical framework is Resilience Theory, drawing principally on Holling's (1973) foundational work on ecological resilience and its subsequent adaptation to socio-economic systems by Folke et al. (2010) and Walker et al. (2004). Resilience in this context refers to the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance, undergo change, and reorganise while essentially retaining the same function, structure, and identity. Applied to tourism, resilience encompasses adaptive capacity — the ability to adjust to crisis conditions, moderate potential damage, and take advantage of opportunities — and transformative capacity — the ability to create fundamentally new systems when

existing ones become untenable (Biggs et al., 2012). The awareness–preparedness paradox directly constrains resilience by preventing the translation of cognitive capacity into adaptive operational capacity.

The third framework is Sustainable Tourism Development, as conceptualised by Bramwell et al. (2017) and grounded in the UNWTO's definition of sustainable tourism as tourism that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. Sustainable tourism development requires that crisis preparedness and resilience-building be integrated into long-term development planning rather than treated as emergency responses to acute disruptions. This temporal dimension is directly relevant to the awareness–preparedness paradox: the failure to institutionalise preparedness not only exposes the sector to short-term crisis damage but undermines the long-term sustainability of tourism-dependent communities and ecosystems.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Crisis Awareness in Tourism

Crisis awareness in the tourism literature encompasses multiple dimensions including awareness of crisis probability, awareness of potential impact severity, awareness of vulnerability factors, and awareness of available response resources (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). High crisis awareness is generally associated with crisis experience — stakeholders who have directly encountered crisis events demonstrate higher awareness than those without direct exposure — and with education, professional training, and access to crisis information systems (Coombs & Laufer, 2018). Research across multiple tourism contexts confirms that stakeholder awareness of natural disaster risk, pandemic risk, and economic shock risk tends to be high among established tourism enterprises, particularly in regions with recent crisis experience (Gössling et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020).

In the African context, crisis awareness is shaped by the layered risk environment characterising the region. Saarinen et al. (2022) demonstrate that Southern African tourism operators exhibit high awareness of climate change-related risks including drought, flood, and temperature extremes, driven by direct experience of these events over recent decades. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically elevated pandemic awareness among tourism operators globally, including across sub-Saharan Africa, through the lived experience of near-total sector collapse in 2020 (UNWTO, 2021; World Bank, 2020b). However, awareness of crisis risk does not in itself constitute preparedness, and the relationship between awareness and preparedness is neither automatic nor linear (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019).

2.2.2 The Awareness–Preparedness Gap in Tourism Crisis Management

The conceptual distinction between awareness and preparedness has generated substantial scholarly attention across the crisis management literature. Pearson and Clair (1998) identify the failure to translate risk awareness into proactive planning as one of the primary drivers of organisational crisis vulnerability. In the tourism sector specifically, Ritchie and Jiang's (2019) review identifies institutional fragmentation — the absence of coordinated crisis governance across the multiple sectors and levels of government involved in tourism — as the primary structural driver of preparedness inadequacy despite high awareness.

Resource constraints represent a second structural barrier. Research across tourism enterprises in developing economies consistently documents that small and medium tourism enterprises prioritise operational expenditure over crisis preparedness investment, particularly in contexts where immediate financial pressures are intense (Van der Veeke et al., 2016; Marco-Lajara et al., 2022). The absence of binding regulatory mandates for crisis preparedness represents a third structural driver. Tourism crisis management research demonstrates that preparedness is highest in jurisdictions where it is legally required and enforcement is credible (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). In the Zambian context, Zimba et al. (2024) and the Ministry of Tourism Zambia (2022a) both identify institutional fragmentation and policy implementation gaps as primary constraints on sector resilience.

2.2.3 Institutional Frameworks and Crisis Governance

Effective tourism crisis management requires an institutional architecture that spans enterprise-level crisis planning, sector-level coordination, national-level governance, and international linkages (WTTC, 2019). At the enterprise level, Faulkner (2001) identifies the development and regular testing of formal crisis management plans as a foundational preparedness requirement. At the sector level, industry associations, tourism agencies, and destination management organisations play critical coordination roles in developing shared preparedness standards, pooling resources, and facilitating information exchange during crisis events (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). In Zambia, this institutional architecture is characterised by fragmentation and coordination deficits. The ZTA serves as the primary sector governance body, but its crisis management mandate and capacity are limited. The DMMU provides national-level disaster governance but lacks sector-specific tourism crisis management capacity. The result is a coordination vacuum in which enterprise-level preparedness is not reinforced by sector-level frameworks and national disaster governance does not extend effectively to the tourism sector's specific vulnerabilities (Ministry of Tourism Zambia, 2022a; Policy Monitoring and Research Centre, 2021).

III. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The target population comprised all tourism stakeholders with crisis management roles in Zambia's major tourism regions. Stratified purposive sampling was applied across five stakeholder categories: government institutions, private sector tourism operators, community-based organisations (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and tourists. Yamane's (1967) formula was applied to a total population frame of 210 registered tourism stakeholders across Livingstone, Lusaka, South Luangwa National Park, Kafue National Park, and the Copperbelt region, yielding a minimum sample of 137 respondents at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. The final sample comprised 50 tourist questionnaire respondents, 41 qualitative questionnaire respondents (predominantly government officials, NGO representatives, and community leaders), 46 quantitative questionnaire respondents (primarily private sector operators and mid-level government staff), and 16 key informant interview participants. Quantitative data were collected through structured five-point Likert-scale questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics, one-sample t-tests, Pearson correlation, and Mann-Whitney U tests. Qualitative insights were generated through semi-structured key informant interviews and thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, supported by ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. Document analysis of policy frameworks, sector reports, and institutional documents provided additional secondary evidence for triangulation.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study sample across the three questionnaire instruments. Of 137 total respondents, 54 (39%) were female and 83 (61%) were male, with the gender imbalance most pronounced in the qualitative questionnaire cohort (68% male), reflecting the leadership-level gender gap documented in Zambia's tourism governance sector. Educational composition showed that 63% of respondents held at least a diploma-level tertiary qualification, supporting the reliability of self-assessed Likert-scale responses.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Crisis Category	Tourist Awareness
Qualitative Questionnaire (n=41)	68% male; age 31–45 (61%); government officials, NGOs, community leaders
Quantitative Questionnaire (n=46)	52% female; age 31–45 (54%); private sector operators, mid-level government
Tourist Questionnaire (n=50)	Near equal gender split; international and domestic tourists
Key Informant Interviews (n=16)	Senior government officials and industry representatives
Education (all respondents)	63% hold minimum diploma-level qualification

4.2 Tourist Perceptions: Pre-Trip Crisis Awareness and Facility Preparedness

Tourist questionnaire data revealed high pre-trip crisis awareness across all four crisis categories. Health and pandemic risks were rated most highly ($M = 4.09$), followed by natural disaster risk ($M = 3.95$), economic instability ($M = 3.88$), and energy shortage risk ($M = 3.76$). Despite this awareness, tourist-rated facility preparedness was substantially lower across all crisis categories. As shown in Table 2, for natural disasters, 38% of tourists rated facilities as 'Not Prepared' and only 11% as 'Very Prepared'; for pandemics, 35% rated facilities as 'Not Prepared'. These tourist perceptions confirm the demand-side dimension of the awareness–preparedness paradox.

Table 2

Tourist Pre-Trip Crisis Awareness by Crisis Category

Crisis Category	Tourist Awareness Mean (out of 5)
Health / Pandemic	4.09
Natural Disaster	3.95
Economic Instability	3.88
Energy Shortage	3.76

Confidence in tourism authorities also showed room for improvement: only 42% of tourists expressed high confidence in authorities' ability to manage crisis events effectively, with 29% expressing low confidence. Importantly, 73% of tourists indicated that crisis management information availability would positively influence their revisit likelihood, confirming that preparedness investment has direct commercial benefits for destination competitiveness.

4.3 Stakeholder Crisis Awareness: Near-Ceiling Scores Across All Categories

Quantitative questionnaire data from 46 stakeholder respondents revealed near-ceiling crisis awareness scores across all four primary crisis categories (see Table 3). Natural disasters ranked highest at $M = 4.85$ ($SD = 0.62$), followed by pandemics at $M = 4.80$ ($SD = 0.70$), economic instability at $M = 4.78$ ($SD = 0.65$), and energy deficits at $M = 4.59$ ($SD = 0.72$). The composite crisis awareness mean of 4.58 ($SD = 0.77$) was confirmed significantly above the neutral midpoint of 3.0 by a one-sample t-test ($t = 44.09$, $df = 45$, $p < 0.001$), representing one of the most decisive statistical findings in this study.

Table 3

Stakeholder Crisis Awareness Scores by Crisis Category

Crisis Category	Awareness M (SD)
Natural Disasters	4.85 (0.62)
Pandemics	4.80 (0.70)
Economic Instability	4.78 (0.65)
Energy Deficits	4.59 (0.72)
Composite Awareness	4.58 (0.77) — $t = 44.09$, $p < 0.001$

Impact dimension analysis further revealed that stakeholders conceptualise crisis impacts in concrete human terms. Employment losses ranked second highest at $M = 4.83$, closely behind natural disaster impact at $M = 4.85$. Revenue decline ($M = 4.79$), wildlife habitat degradation ($M = 4.74$), and destination image damage ($M = 4.72$) also ranked highly. This multidimensional awareness profile confirms that Zambia's tourism stakeholders possess sophisticated, experience-grounded understanding of crisis impact mechanisms — understanding that should, in principle, motivate strong preparedness investment but which has not translated into operational readiness.

4.4 Preparedness Capacity: At a Statistically Do-Nothing Baseline

The preparedness capacity mean of 2.98 ($SD = 0.77$) was confirmed as statistically indistinguishable from the neutral midpoint of 3.0 by a one-sample t-test ($t = -0.40$, $df = 45$, $p = 0.689$). This finding is analytically decisive: it establishes that Zambia's tourism sector's collective preparedness capacity is, at a sector-wide level, statistically equivalent to having done nothing to prepare. Table 4 presents item-level preparedness scores, identifying the most critical preparedness deficits.

Table 4

Preparedness Capacity Item-Level Scores

Preparedness Dimension	Mean (SD)
Crisis simulation drill frequency	2.11 (0.93)
Financial reserves for crisis periods	2.24 (1.02)
Insurance coverage	2.28 (0.98)
Multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms	2.78 (1.05)
Sector-wide early warning system access	2.96 (1.14)
Employee training in crisis management	3.02 (0.88)
Composite Preparedness Capacity	2.98 (0.77) — $t = -0.40$, $p = 0.689$

Financial reserves for crisis periods ($M = 2.24$) and insurance coverage ($M = 2.28$) exhibited the lowest scores, confirming that financial preparedness represents the deepest vulnerability. Crisis simulation drill frequency ($M = 2.11$) was the single lowest-scoring item, indicating that even among enterprises with some formal planning capacity, rehearsal and testing of plans is near-absent. These findings align with Ritchie and Jiang's (2019) identification of resource constraints and voluntary compliance as primary drivers of preparedness inadequacy in developing-country tourism contexts.

4.5 The Awareness–Preparedness Gap: Crisis-Type-Specific Analysis

Table 5 juxtaposes awareness and preparedness scores by crisis type, revealing the full structural magnitude of the paradox. Natural disasters exhibit the widest awareness–preparedness gap at -1.95 , and pandemics an identical gap of -1.95 , confirming that despite the traumatic direct experience of COVID-19, institutional pandemic preparedness has not been established in any systematic sense across the sector. Economic shocks exhibit a severe gap of -1.66 , while energy deficits show a still-severe gap of -1.54 .

Table 5*Crisis-Type-Specific Awareness–Preparedness Gap Analysis*

Crisis Type	Awareness M	Preparedness M	Gap (Δ)
Natural Disasters	4.85	2.90	-1.95
Pandemics	4.80	2.85	-1.95
Economic Shocks	4.78	3.12	-1.66
Energy Deficits	4.59	3.05	-1.54
Composite	4.58	2.98	-1.60

4.6 Inferential Statistics: The Awareness–Preparedness Relationship

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship between composite crisis awareness and preparedness capacity ($r = 0.476$, $p = 0.001$). This finding is theoretically important: it confirms that awareness is a necessary precondition for preparedness — stakeholders who are more aware tend to exhibit marginally higher preparedness — but simultaneously demonstrates that awareness is far from sufficient. The $r = 0.476$ correlation, while statistically significant, leaves the majority of variance in preparedness unexplained by awareness, confirming the operation of structural barriers that prevent awareness from being converted into operational readiness. The Mann-Whitney U test for gender differences in pandemic preparedness perceptions yielded $U = 271$ ($p = 0.835$), confirming no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents. This finding establishes that the awareness–preparedness paradox is not a gender-specific phenomenon but reflects sector-wide structural conditions, increasing the external validity of the study's conclusions.

4.7 Qualitative Findings: Institutional Drivers of the Paradox

Thematic analysis of qualitative questionnaire responses and key informant interview transcripts identified four primary themes in the institutional drivers of the awareness–preparedness gap. The first and most frequently cited theme was institutional fragmentation, identified by 87% of qualitative respondents as a primary challenge. Respondents described a landscape in which the Ministry of Tourism, ZTA, DMMU, provincial government offices, industry associations, and individual enterprises operate in relative isolation, without the coordination mechanisms, shared information systems, or unified governance frameworks necessary for systemic crisis response. This finding is consistent with Saarinen et al.'s (2022) documentation of governance fragmentation as a primary resilience constraint across Southern African tourism destinations. The second theme was resource and funding constraints, identified by 65% of qualitative respondents as a primary barrier. Tourism enterprises, particularly small and medium operators in rural areas, reported that immediate financial demands of operational sustainability preclude investment in crisis planning, insurance, staff training, and resilience infrastructure. This finding aligns with Van der Veecken et al.'s (2016) and Marco-Lajara et al.'s (2022) documentation of resource allocation constraints as structural barriers to preparedness in developing-economy tourism contexts.

The third theme was policy implementation gaps, identified by 71% of qualitative respondents. Respondents frequently distinguished between the existence of policy frameworks and their effective implementation, noting that the National Tourism Policy and the DMMU's national disaster reduction framework lack the sector-specific tourism provisions, clear institutional mandates, and enforcement mechanisms necessary to drive enterprise-level preparedness. The fourth theme was digital infrastructure deficits, identified by 66% of qualitative respondents, who emphasised the absence of functional real-time crisis monitoring systems, mobile alert platforms, and digital data-sharing infrastructure as critical constraints on early warning capacity and crisis communication.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**5.1 Conclusion**

This study provides the first systematic empirical quantification of the awareness–preparedness paradox in Zambia's tourism industry. The findings establish conclusively that the sector's crisis management challenge is not a knowledge deficit but an institutional incapacity: near-universal awareness of crisis threats (composite $M = 4.58$) coexists with preparedness capacity that is statistically indistinguishable from doing nothing ($M = 2.98$, $p = 0.689$). The resulting 1.60-point awareness–preparedness gap is most severe for natural disasters and pandemics, precisely the crisis categories for which Zambia's tourism industry has the most direct recent experience. The institutional drivers of this paradox are structural: fragmented governance, inadequate resource allocation, absent policy enforcement, and digital infrastructure deficits collectively prevent the conversion of acknowledged risk into operational readiness. These findings advance the crisis management literature's understanding of the awareness–preparedness relationship in sub-Saharan African contexts and have substantial practical significance for tourism crisis governance in Zambia.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are advanced. First, the Ministry of Tourism and Arts should mandate formal crisis management planning for all registered tourism enterprises, with ZTA providing technical support and monitoring compliance. Second, the DMMU should formally integrate the tourism sector into its national disaster risk reduction architecture, with tourism-specific hazard mapping, early warning protocols, and simulation exercises. Third, the government and development partners should establish a National Tourism Crisis Resilience Fund to address the financial preparedness deficit, with pooled insurance mechanisms for small and medium operators. Fourth, the ZTA should invest in digital crisis monitoring and alert infrastructure, providing real-time crisis information to all registered tourism enterprises through mobile-accessible platforms. Fifth, future research should employ longitudinal designs to track the evolution of the awareness–preparedness gap following institutional interventions, and should extend the analysis to sub-regional and pan-African comparative contexts.

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