Goats and Soda

GOATS AND SODA

Viral global TikToks: A twist on soccer, Tanzania's Charlie Chaplin, hope in Gaza

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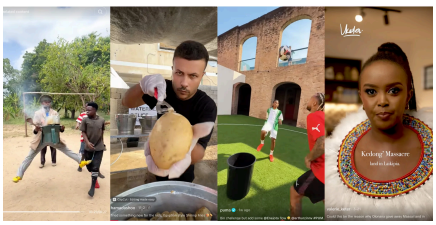


Michal Ruprecht

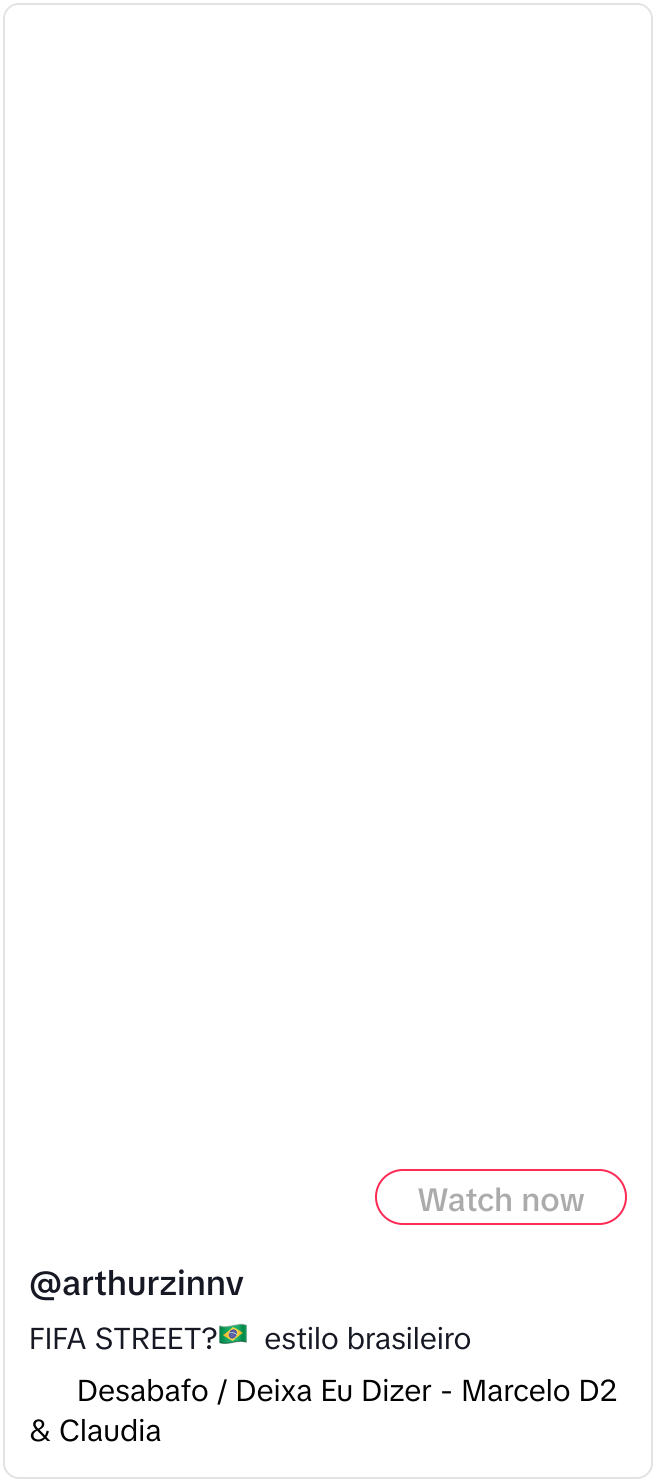
From left: Fanuel John Masamaki's comedy is inspired by the silent movie star Charlie Chaplin. Hamada Shaqoura, a Palestinian food influencer, cooks Egyptian-style shrimp fries. Arthur Marques plays soccer for a living, but it's soccer with a twist. Valerie Keter, dressed in a traditional beaded collar from the Maasai people in southern Kenya, discusses the history of the ancient tribe.

From left: @zerobrainer0, @hamadashoo, @arthurzinnv and @valerie_keter; screengrabs by NPR

More than one billion users visit TikTok every month, and since its launch in 2016, it's grown to become one of the most popular social media platforms. And controversial, too. India, for example, banned the app in 2020, and Australia barred children under 16 from using it and other social media this month.

Every year, NPR interviews TikTok creators from around the world, exploring the trends, subcultures and stories that drive culture and social change in the Global South. This year, we interviewed creators from Brazil, Gaza, Kenya and Tanzania. The four creators each have amassed millions of views, but they also contributed to a much bigger story: one of hope, advocacy and connection.

A different way to play with a soccer ball



Becoming a professional soccer player was always Arthur Marques' (@arthurzinnv) goal.

"In Brazil, being a professional soccer player is everyone's dream as a kid," Marques says through an interpreter.

The 20-year-old TikToker sort of made that dream come true.

Yes, he plays soccer for a living. But it's soccer with a twist.

It's called *altinha*, Portuguese for "a little higher." Players stand in a circle and keep a ball in the air for as long as possible using their feet, knees, chins, hips, heads and even their butts — anything but their hands. Marques' record is five minutes.

Sounds … a little short. But it's not. "That's a lot of time," Marques says. "It looks easy, but there are a lot of dynamics at play. It's almost like boxing nonstop for five minutes."

Locals started playing soccer on Rio de Janeiro's iconic Copacabana Beach in 1927. But stray balls soon clashed with sunbathers, and officials tightened rules. By the 1930s, restrictions made it increasingly difficult to play the sport on the beach, and while enforcement waxed and waned over the decades, obstacles persisted.

So local soccer lovers invented *altinha* in the 1960s on Ipanema Beach. It hasn't always been welcome on Brazil's beaches though and was even temporarily banned in 2009.

As for Marques, his dream of becoming a professional soccer player faded when he realized he didn't have the chops for the elite level. So he turned to *altinha*. In 2021, he started practicing the sport and began posting videos of himself on TikTok a year later.

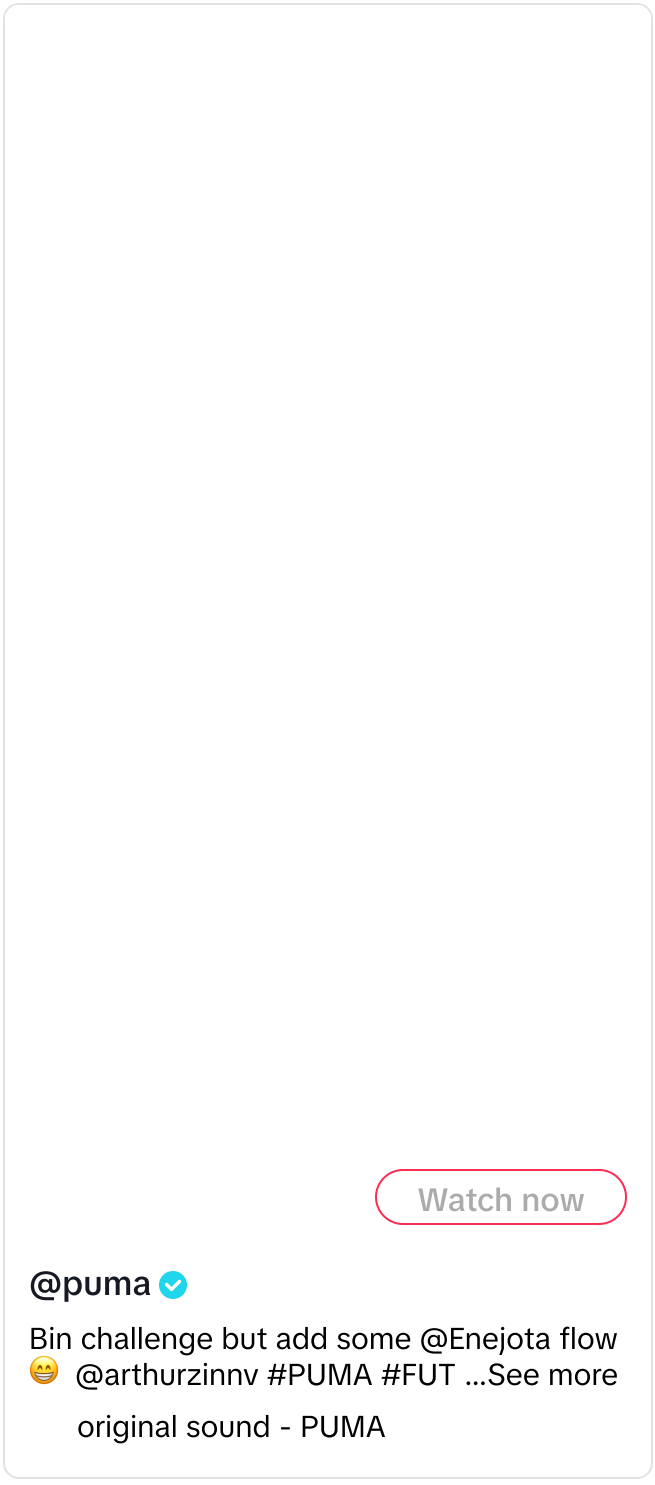
While the game is played across the country, its pulse throbs in Rio. To be closer to the scene, Marques made trips to the city from his hometown, São Gonçalo, about an hour away across the bay from Rio. Still in school and the son of two street vendors, he could barely afford the commute.

"My two siblings and I had some difficult times growing up, but it was never that hard because we had each other," Marques recalls.

As his videos began to take off, Marques committed fully to social media. He says he would sometimes stay up until 4 a.m. to edit videos on his mom's phone — which was newer and faster than his phone — and then head to high school two hours later.

Marques is now participating in the growing trend of playing *altinha* on the street courts of Rio's favelas — its lowest-income neighborhoods — instead of on the

beach. Neymar — one of Brazil's most celebrated soccer players — even joined Marques for a round of *altinha* in an old warehouse this July.

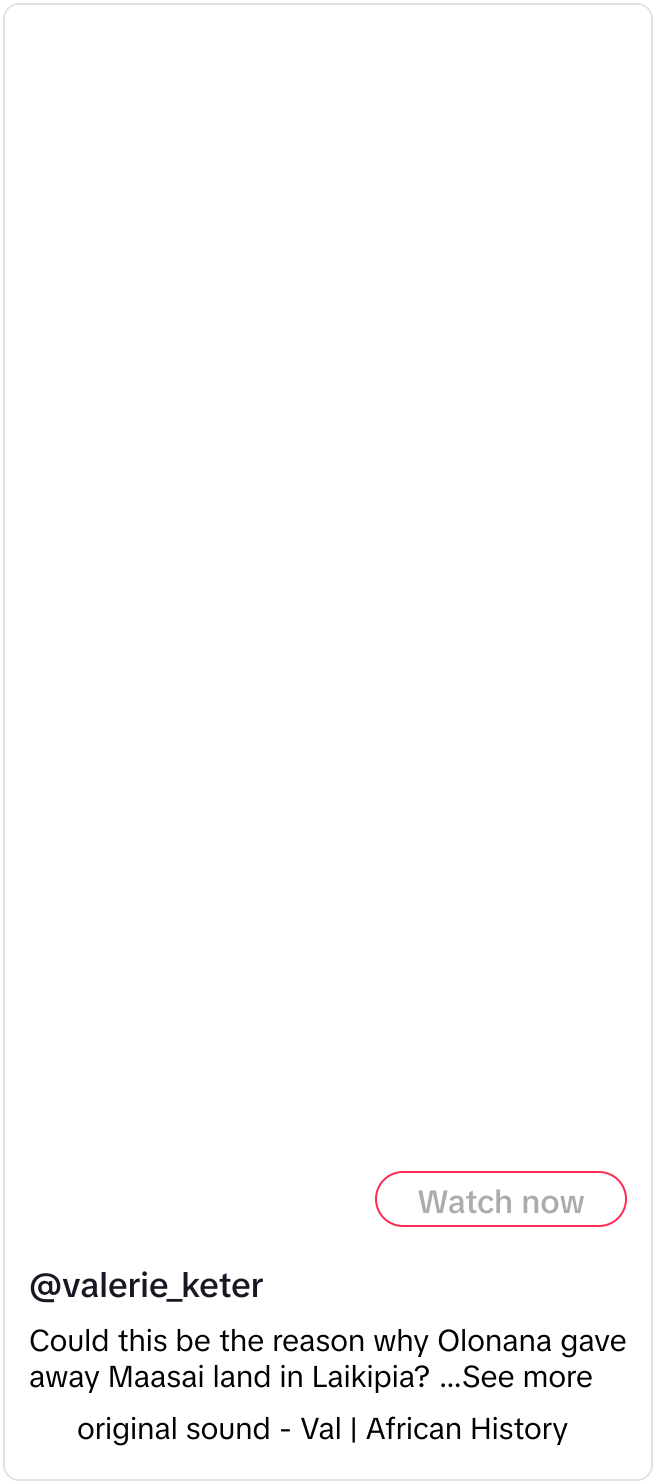


"I tried to keep it cool and professional, but I was so excited inside," Marques says.

His next stop is Africa's biggest international soccer tournament, where he was invited to showcase the game in Morocco. His goal is to help usher the sport into the Olympics one day.

"I'm able to unite people from different places and social classes when I play *altinha*," Marques says. "It's a moment for us to forget about our differences."

Forgotten corners of Africa's history



While driving through the bustling streets of Nairobi, Kenya, Valerie Keter (@valerie_keter) was intrigued by a billboard.

"It was advertising a German language school and written on it was, 'Schule,'" Keter recalls. "In my mind, I'm like, 'Shule is actually Swahili for school.' So I start thinking, 'OK, who borrowed from whom?'"

That question took Keter down a rabbit hole exploring the history of Swahili — the most widely spoken language in Kenya — and presenting her findings on TikTok.

"From there, I ended up discovering that actually there are more Swahili words that were borrowed from other languages — not just German," Keter explains.

This epiphany is one of many that led the 31-year-old to make videos on overlooked corners of African history and culture. She sometimes wears the traditional beaded collars of the Maasai people in southern Kenya as she tells her tales.

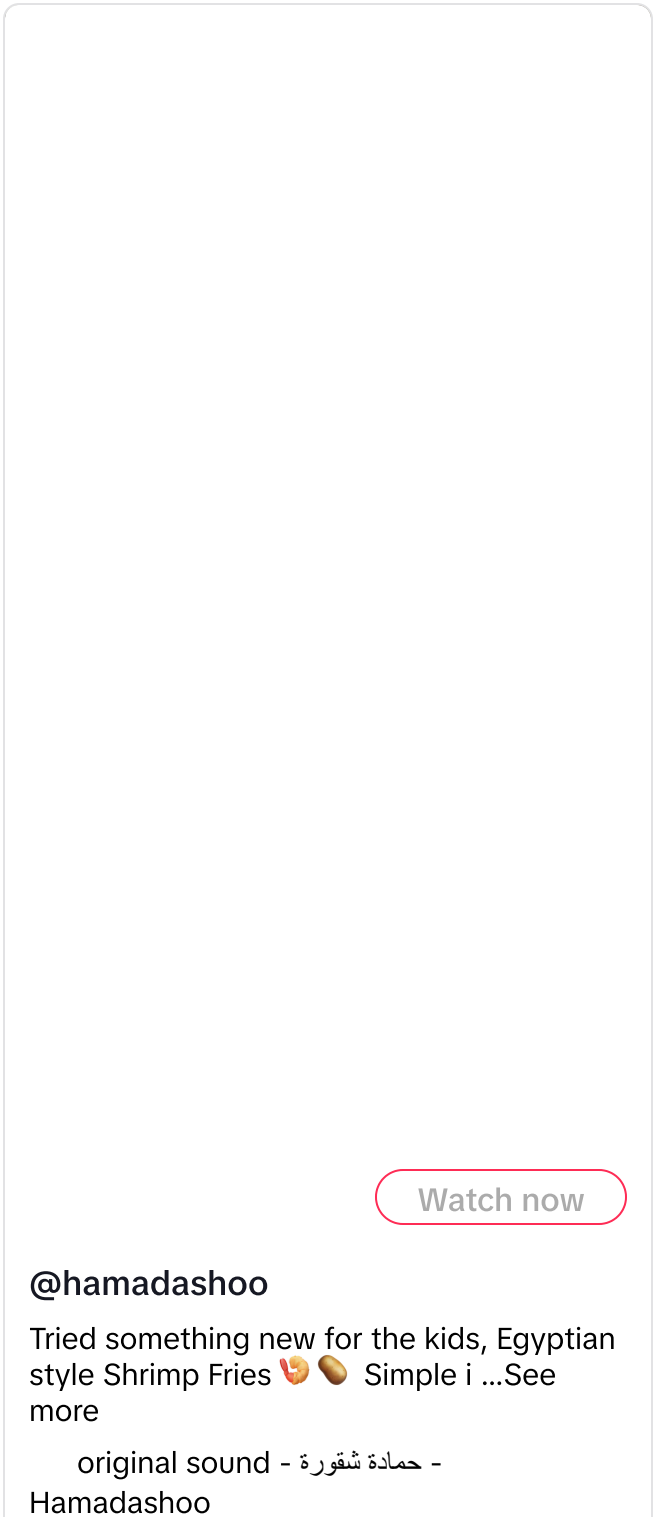
Her passion for history and storytelling stems from the documentaries she watched with her family during childhood. As she grew older, she realized how few documentaries chronicled African history.

"Up to today, that lingers with me, and I think it's driven me to a point where I'm seeing there's a need to represent Africa," she says. "Making sure that everybody is aware of what our history entails and the fact that there's a lot of rich history in Africa is important."

Next year, she hopes to gather and share stories from elders — stories that have never made it into textbooks because they're passed down orally. Keter sees this work as a bridge between parts of the continent divided by culture and language.

"If you look at Francophone countries and then the Anglophone nations in Africa, it's like we're not in each other's spaces. It's like everybody is just on their own," Keter says. "Creating this type of content has enabled me to interact with other creators from across the continent."

Giving hope to Gaza



At first glance, Hamada Shaqoura's (@hamadashoo) TikToks look like any other so-called "sizzle cut" — quick, close-up cooking clips stitched together with amplified sounds of knives chopping through vegetables, liquids splashing into pans and food hitting hot oil.

But his direct gaze, furrowed brow and serious demeanor stand out, as does the rubble behind him.

"This facial expression is derived from the tiredness we have felt during the war," Shaqoura says through an interpreter.

His expression softens at the end of his videos when he serves the food to Palestinian children in northern Gaza. "The situation here is very hard, and through this difficult time, I wanted to try to make something special, especially for these children."

Since 2024, the 34-year-old has been posting his cooking videos. It's a drastic change from his work before the war, when he reviewed food from Gaza's restaurants.

"Before the war, my ambition was to become a food blogger, travel the world, taste different cuisines and experience the world through food culture," he says.

This year was particularly challenging for the creator. In August, a panel of international experts on food insecurity, backed by the United Nations, declared a famine in the region, and the suffering of malnourished children made headlines. Simultaneously, food prices skyrocketed, pushing Shaqoura into a three-month hiatus.

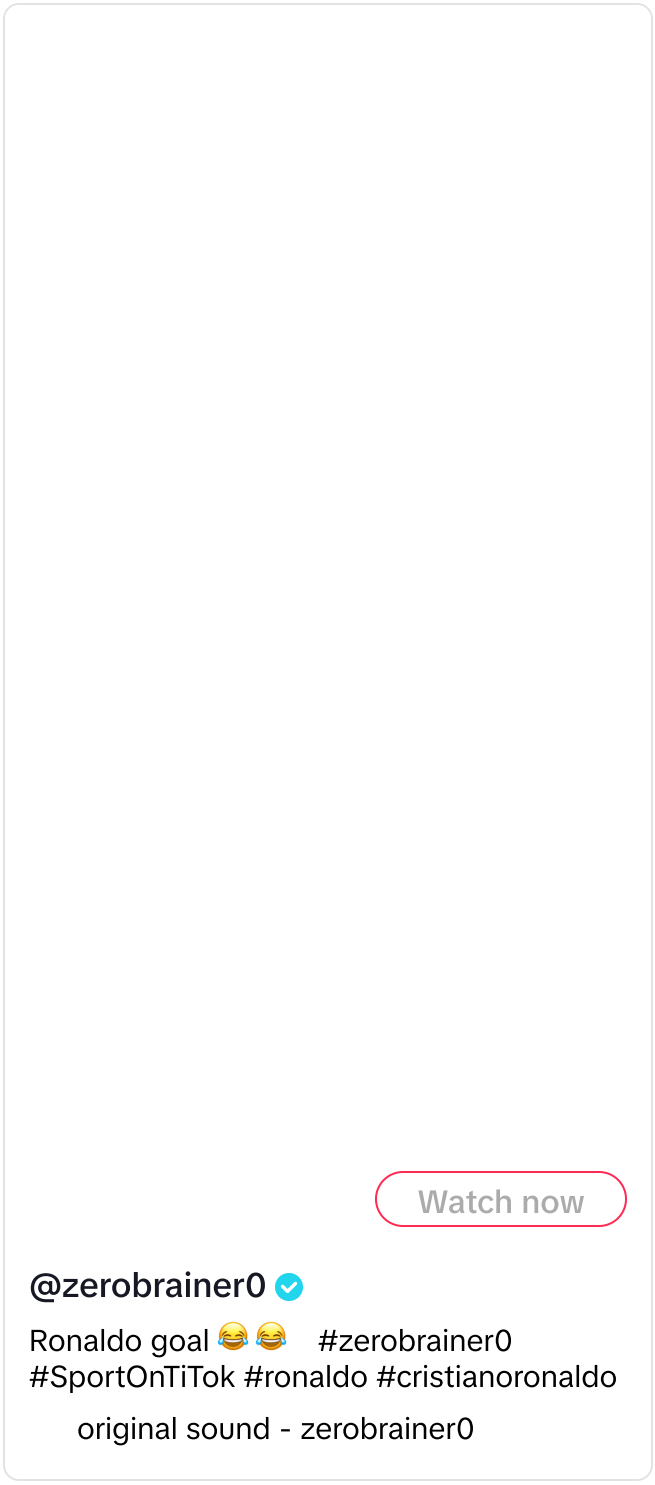
While the famine designation has been lifted, hunger continues to grip parts of Gaza. His videos returned in October, and they've taken on even more meaning. Weeks after his return to social media, Shaqoura and his wife welcomed their second child.

"My son and daughter were both born during the war, so this made me want to help children even more because all the children in Gaza are my children as well," Shaqoura says. "I want these children to feel that there is still hope — that they can still eat good food and enjoy delicious things."

Shaqoura contends that his fame is a cruel paradox. If it weren't for the war, he says his TikToks likely wouldn't have received international recognition. Still, despite the hardship of conflict, he remains hopeful.

"I could sense that people in Gaza were missing this feeling — the feeling of good food," Shaqoura says. "I want to remind them what food was like before the war and what the atmosphere was like before the war. We're trying to bring back the things we experienced before the war. We will restore people's hopes. We will restore Gaza and show people what life was like before this war."

A Tanzanian inspired by Charlie Chaplin



A one-off job cleaning a church in Tanzania forged Fanuel John Masamaki's (@zerobrainer0) signature look.

"I was cleaning a church, and one of the items we found was this hat," Masamaki says through an interpreter. "When I started wearing it in the first few videos,

people reacted to it positively, so I kept wearing it."

The weathered hat, reminiscent of a vintage military-style peaked cap, is olive green and stylized with a thin gold piping that traces the perimeter. Below that is a darker layer wrapping around the base with a single metal button on the side. The brim itself is short, glossy and black. Masamaki wears the oversized cap tilted back with a wide grin — a playful contrast to its authoritarian design.

The 25-year-old now dons that peaked cap and a long overcoat in his videos, where he plays soccer in a Charlie Chaplin-style pantomime — exaggerated, off-kilter movements that echo the English actor, minus the mustache and cane.

"I'm actually a huge fan of Charlie Chaplin. I used to watch him a lot when I was younger," Masamaki says. "Like Charlie Chaplin, I don't speak during my skits. I draw a lot of inspiration from his work."

And it seems like Chaplin's influence rubbed off on Masamaki. As a young student, he says he regularly put on comedy skits in his hometown.

Masamaki grew up in Tanzania's Kilimanjaro region, one of seven kids born to two farmers.

"Life was not easy. It's the kind of life many African families experience," Masamaki recalls. "Life was difficult growing up with parents who didn't make a lot of money."

Despite a difficult childhood, Masamaki clung to art. Storytelling became his focus, and he dropped out of university in his final year studying mechanical engineering.

That same year, he started posting on TikTok, choosing the handle "zerobrainer0" to reflect his slapstick-style of comedy. "It literally means that you're out of your mind."

At a time when there's been recent strife in Tanzania, Masamaki sees his videos as an opportunity for Tanzanians to take their minds off the country's bitter divisions. And he now views his signature hat — which was once worn by a stranger — as a symbol of unity.

"I like that my content is not political," Masamaki says. "My work is helping my fans who lost loved ones wipe their tears away. It's bringing back smiles, happiness and warmth — all of that."

Jacob Azar, Samuel Evans and Felipe Oliveira interpreted during the interviews with Hamada Shaqoura, Fanuel John Masamaki and Arthur Marques, respectively. Michal Ruprecht is a Stanford Global Health Media Fellow.

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