



KASONGO AND THE WARTHOG: TIKTOK MEMES AND ARCHIVES OF KENYAN YOUTH POPULAR CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper explores TikTok as a dynamic arena for collective contestation in Kenya, where young content creators repurpose the popular song “Kasongo” by crafting memes—understood here as units of meaning appropriated and redeployed to express critique in local social commentary. By focusing on the Kasongo meme, the study analyses how creators reimagine not just the song, but a range of older popular texts, recontextualising them within contemporary Kenyan socio-political realities. Through TikTok, Kenyan youth are actively refashioning elements of popular heritage and leveraging them to challenge authority and critique power structures. The paper explains how TikTok enables youth to navigate and articulate their lived realities—their ‘local daily lifeworld.’ Methodologically, it applies textual analysis to TikTok videos, reading them as signifiers within a broader cultural discourse in which exaggeration, caricature, and laughter combine to produce a composite grotesque that is then lampooned. Here, grotesquerie is deployed as a deliberate technique of social critique: close analysis of selected texts reveals the precise objects and mechanisms of this critique and demonstrates TikTok’s appeal to Kenyan youth. While this practice echoes Kenya’s broader historical tradition of using popular music for socio-political commentary, social media stands out for democratizing access to cultural archives and fostering solidarity within imagined online communities. From a corpus of 100 sampled TikTok videos utilising the Kasongo meme, 22 are analysed to show how the song is repurposed to reflect contemporary issues of concern. The paper concludes by showing how this form of online activism contests dominant narratives, empowers youth, and demonstrates the transformative potential of social media to reshape cultural archives for specific causes.

Keywords: Kenyan youth, archives, decontextualization, grotesque, memes, popular culture.

‘*Kasongo*’: or marriage as (anti-)social contract

Chorus

Kasongo ye ye mobali na ngai
Kasongo nga nawe oo
Zonga libala ee

My husband
 Kasongo I am dying[I’m suffering/in pain]
 Come back to the marriage x 2

Nga na ndako Kasongo
Miso na nzela
Soki okozonga dia ee
yebisa nga ye ee

While [you’re] in the house
 [You’re] Staring at the street
 If you will ever return
 Let me know dear

Chorus

Libala na ndako Kasongo
Banutaka ngai

In this kind of marriage
 They are busy interrogating me

Tata azali wapi ee?
Naloba nini ee

Where is the father?
 What do I say?

(Chorus, instruments)

Source: Orchestre Super Mazembe (Jabulani Radio)¹

The song is a lament voiced by a woman mourning her husband’s betrayal. *Kasongo*, the husband, has violated their marriage contract by pursuing another woman, abandoning his home, and neglecting his responsibilities as both husband and family head. Even when present, his attention is elsewhere—‘while you’re in the house/You’re staring at the street’—and his absence suggests further indiscretions. The wife’s longing goes unanswered, and her plea—‘If you will ever return/ let me know dear’—is more resignation than hope. In her eyes, *Kasongo* is deceitful and emotionally abusive, a monster who has imprisoned her in a marriage marked by betrayal, lost rights, and persistent emotional harm.

Social media has transformed engagement with African cultural archives, as seen in how Kenyan TikTok users have reimagined *Kasongo* to satirize politicians. *Kasongo*’s anti-social persona is projected onto Kenyan politics, turning him into a symbol of political disregard for the public. His significance shifts from wayward husband to potent political trope. By equating the unfaithful spouse with politicians who break promises and abuse power, young Kenyans express their discontent with creative force. In recent Kenyan political culture, alliances between rivals are often described as ‘marriages’²—strategic, transactional, and fraught with hidden agendas. Like these political partnerships, marital unions can be riddled with betrayal and manipulation. The TikTok memes examined here illuminate how youth view the ‘social contract’³ with their leaders as fundamentally broken. For these content creators, the details of *Kasongo*’s marriage matter less than the broader symbolism of his anti-social behavior, which becomes a stand-in for all that is perceived to be wrong with government.

During the 2025 New Year’s Eve celebrations at Kisii State Lodge, Kenyan president William Ruto, accompanied by his wife and top officials, led a dance to *Kasongo*. The irony was striking: a song long satirically deployed on TikTok to critique those in power, and pointedly ignored by officials, was now embraced at a state function. Ruto’s public adoption of the *Kasongo* moniker—previously weaponized

by youth online—was a dramatic shift. Soon after the Finance Bill protests, TikTok videos had already articulated young people's grievances, laying the foundation for ongoing digital dissent. In subsequent appearances, Ruto insisted he took no offense at being called Kasongo, even sarcastically praising the song and inviting more nicknames, claiming that Kasongo meant he was 'smarter' than his critics. This self-characterization clashed with the song's depiction of Kasongo as wayward, not clever. By accepting these labels, Ruto acknowledged them as legitimate forms of citizen commentary on his administration.

What explains this sudden reversal? Psychology offers the concept of 'naming to tame,' where negative terms are intentionally embraced to neutralize their sting. This process of re-appropriation can flip meanings or strip words of their power. In hip hop, for example, historically derogatory language is reclaimed as a badge of identity and solidarity. Ruto's embrace of Kasongo appears to have been a calculated move to defuse its critical force. The tactic worked to a degree: TikTok users quickly coined new nicknames bearing Swahili's diminutive prefix *ka-* —'*Kaongo*' (little liar) and '*kahongo*' (little bribe-taker)—but these failed to gain the same traction as 'Kasongo' or previous monikers like '*Zakayo*.'

Theory and methodology

A revealing comment from Mose, a young man in his early thirties, illustrates how Kasongo memes⁴ craft monsters for social critique: "These images of politicians that I see on TikTok remind me of ogres!" (2025)⁵. Mose's insight anticipates the use of grotesquerie as a theoretical lens for interpreting Kasongo memes. The ogre (often male but 'she' is also present) is a common figure in Kenyan folklore, depicted as gluttonous, filthy, deceitful and detested for his frightening appearance and antisocial behavior. Often carnivorous with a taste for human flesh, the ogre epitomizes monstrosity, a character template to which we will return in our analysis.

Two main theories inform our approach: Barber's theorization of everyday creative expression in Africa and Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque. Barber (1997a; 1997b) argues that everyday acts like bumper stickers, slogans, and cartoons are authentic forms of popular culture—unofficial records through which people interpret and communicate their lived realities. TikTok videos fit squarely within this framework, serving as contemporary folk documentation. Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, meanwhile, highlights how the powerful can be symbolically toppled by ordinary people's transgressive acts—often through humor, vulgarity, and the inversion of social hierarchy (Bakhtin, 1984: 303-367). The polished language of elites is replaced by slang, and decorum gives way to coarseness. Political figures may also be lampooned through exaggerated focus on bodily functions and taboos, creating what Bakhtin terms "grotesque realism."

In Kenyan meme culture, politicians are often caricatured to elicit laughter (Kiguru, 2022: 9). But memes do more than ridicule—they render those in power unseemly and unacceptable, making them easier targets for criticism. Editorial cartoons, for example, depict politicians with exaggerated, monstrous features: bulbous noses, cavernous mouths, floppy ears, frog-like eyes, spindly legs—traits that evoke derision rather than sympathy (Daily Nation, October 8, 2025, p.13). One cartoon, featuring twenty-seven politicians in grotesque form—complete with devil's horns and handcuffs—shows them sarcastically thanking voters for tolerating their deceit and failures. On social media, corruption is frequently symbolized by vultures: politicians who consume everything, even the dead (Haugerud et al, 2020:275).

By portraying those in power as grotesque, TikTok users create distance and justify harsh critique. Government officials, seen as engaging in anti-people behavior, forfeit their humanity in the eyes of

youth and become fair game for scathing, sometimes taboo-breaking criticism. This symbolic vengeance explains the visceral anger in some memes, which may even broach topics like death wishes. Youth anger sometimes spills into real-life protest, as seen in the June 2024 unrest, where politicians' homes and businesses were attacked, and government allies assaulted (Citizen TV 2024). Online, tactics like "injecting" or "*kusalimia*" (bombarding officials with annoying messages or small payments sent through their phones) channel public anger into digital protest.

To study these dynamics, we surveyed 100 TikTok videos from June 2024 to September 2025 featuring Super Mazembe's Kasongo or imagery derived from it. From this set, we selected 22 for textual analysis, focusing on how the song and character are repurposed to construct a contemporary Kenyan popular imaginary. We identified memes and analyzed them for themes of anti-social behavior, compiling a list of recurring motifs from the data.

Data presentation: Youth perceptions of the failed social contract

Each TikTok video in our sample was assigned a code from A to G, corresponding to the appendix list. After identifying key memes in each video, we grouped them by theme and explained how each meme addresses issues raised by youth. Video A, for example, spotlights grievances from the #RejectFinanceBill2024 movement, linking early TikTok discourse with the later 2025 youth protests. The accompanying table (see below) reveals significant theme overlaps—corruption, broken promises, dishonesty—with categorizations meant to prompt discussion. The most frequent theme was politicians' empty promises (29 mentions, 5,212 shares), followed by corruption (10 mentions, 9,003 shares), politicians' lies (9 mentions, 6,534 shares), and lack of accountability (7 mentions, 8,384 shares). These data points signal a deep youth interest in integrity and good governance, with the four major themes together highlighting a powerful desire for honesty and accountability in Kenyan politics.

Data Table: meme and theme occurrence and sharing of videos

S/No.	Theme	Key image/s	Total Frequencies / Counts	Brief explanation
1	Youth Grievances A	A well-dressed young man standing facing the camera. Portrait of Mau Mau freedom fighter Dedan Kimathi. The words 'June 25 Protest' and 'I would rather die on my feet than live on my knees.'	Explains governance failures, a theme that runs through all the videos	Exhortations to fight against government oppression and assert civil liberties such as the right to protest; outlines the evils the president has committed such as imposing high taxation on Kenyans.
2	Politician's Empty Promises B1,B2,B3	Black Kasongo Silhouette. Huge empty cup; Empty black wheelbarrow. The Bible; Unfinished tarmac road. Ruto's promises in a high-pitched staccato voice	15 Empty cup images. 10 Empty wheelbarrow images. 4 uncompleted (poorly done) tarmac roads Resharing: 5,212	Employs visual metaphors of hollow items (cup/wheelbarrow) and incomplete and abandoned taxpayer funded road projects.

3	Politicians' Double Speak and Shapeshifting C1, C2	Shifting identity: Black Kasongo silhouette; Guitar-payer; DJ in suit and hair locks.	Occurrences: 5 shifts Resharing: 69	Depicts a politician lacking a consistent, identity who is, focused on showmanship. The politician is depicted as a “shape shifter,” capable of rapidly changing their persona to appeal to different audiences or to mask their true intent.
4	Politicians Lies B3, F1	Hand brush ready to paint a tarmac road. Deputy president hand spraying tar on a rural dirt road. Unfinished tarmacked road. Cooking oil named ‘Freshlies’; a heap of chapatti placed above the letters ‘SHA-fashi.’	Occurrences in different speeches: 9 Resharing: 6,534	Showcases physical acts of deception, such as superficial road repairs and the literal branding of lies as a consumer product.
5	Youth Cancelling Politicians E1	‘No Kasongo’ stickers on laptops; cars, and notebooks.	Occurrences of the stickers in the clip: 5 Resharing: 5	The act of ‘cancelling’ is operationalised through the distribution of ‘No Kasongo’ stickers. Placing them in highly visible, personal spaces (laptops, cars, notebooks) turns private property into a public declaration.
6	Corruption F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6	Chapatti in different shapes; feast, ‘Freshlies’ cooking oil; Ruto wearing a suit made out of chapatti; Ruto with mounds of chapatti stacked on a table all around him; Ruto distributing chapatti on a bicycle	Occurrences: 10 Resharing: 9,003	Portrays the systemic consumption of public funds depicted as a feast for the political class.
7	Politicians' Dishonourable Irritations G1, G2, G3, G4	Unreasonable Taxes, Corruption, Fake fertilizer, Kasongo’s misconduct (warthog), wild dogs chasing Kasongo.	Occurrences: 4 Resharing: 5,915	Visualisation of policy failures and the personal irritation caused by the politician’s animalistic disregard for duty.
8	The Accountability Dilemma G2, G3	Kasongo the warthog; giraffe; sleeping lions; lions and cubs; piglet; wild dogs	Occurrences: 7 escapes Resharing: 8,384	Explores the evasion of responsibility, showing multiple instances of escaping consequences before the eventual outcome.

Note: The data on sharing varies upwards as videos are sent on to other users; the ‘shares’ presented here are current to December 16, 2025.

An analysis of selected texts

The following discussion highlights several videos that illuminate key issues through the Kasongo caricature, the food trope, and the warthog character. The song *Kasongo* and its caricature appear in nearly all the videos; in AI animations, Kasongo emerges as a dark, ghostly figure whose stealth and threatening appearance evoke fear (C1). The transformation from the familiar figure of Ruto to a shadowy image underscores a relationship between youth and government defined by suspicion and dread—sentiments that resonate across the analyzed videos. Unsurprisingly, depictions of politicians’ empty promises had the highest count (29 videos).

A central grievance among youth is the unfulfilled promises made by Ruto’s government during the 2022 election campaigns. In “Kasogo yeye” (B1), Kasongo is depicted hurrying along with a large, empty tin cup in one hand and a Bible in the other, while *Kasongo* plays in the background. Encountering an empty wheelbarrow, he quickly veers away. The UDA party rose to power on a promise to uplift the so-called “hustlers”—yet youth see no evidence of prosperity. The hope represented by the Bible and campaign events is portrayed as betrayed. In “Kasoo go” (B2), a variation of the first video, three choir girls sing *Kasongo*, and Ruto is shown gulping from the tin cup as he scurries away. Both the government and church are satirized for deceiving the public; if there is anything to eat, it is the government that eats first, leaving the poor with only empty hope.

In AI-generated video B3, the president appears as a silhouette wielding a paintbrush, drawing a road, while the deputy president sprays paint on an earth road and tractors level the soil. Ruto’s voice promises road development, rattling off location names at breakneck speed—a parody of empty promises and ghost projects. Well-dressed officials on one side of the painted road and rural folk on the other cheer him on, highlighting the contrast between ego-stroking and public gullibility. The rehearsed nature of the speech makes it clear the spectacle is performative, not substantive.

Food imagery—chapatti and *mandazi*—often takes the form of the Kasongo silhouette, distorted for humor and grotesque effect (F1-F6). By turning Kasongo into a literal food item, the videos symbolically show those in power being “eaten up” and degraded. Bakhtinian grotesquery is at play here: power is reduced to lower bodily functions, symbolically punishing those who abuse it. Food is also used as a corruption trope: chapatti, a beloved Kenyan delicacy, features prominently in the most-shared corruption videos. Parodies like “FreshLies” cooking oil mock official programs, while depictions of political leaders hoarding food highlight gluttony and greed. These images of wanton consumption echo the ogre motif and reinforce the view that “eating” resources meant for the vulnerable is a grave betrayal.

In nearly all videos about lack of accountability, the warthog Kasongo is central, imagined as the “smartest” animal. The popularity of this figure may be traced to Pumbaa in “The Lion King”, familiar to Kenyan audiences and already associated with foolishness in Kiswahili (“pumbaa” means “foolish”). Yet Pumbaa is a contradiction: mischievous, naive, but not truly stupid, using his carefree mantra “*hakuna matata*” to get by. The warthog’s unsightly warts and flatulent tendencies are metaphors for the objectionable traits of those in power. As a TikTok character, Kasongo the warthog is a nuisance whose only goal is to irritate others—mirroring politicians who pass unpopular laws or evade accountability.

The animal cast—warthog, lion, giraffe, hyena, leopard, wild dog—serves as a symbolic ecosystem, with the warthog as a trickster marked by greed, dishonesty, and slyness. His short memory allows repeated

offenses, and despite provoking other animals, he always escapes, much like politicians who avoid consequences.

A connection is also made to the domestic pig, a longstanding symbol of greed in Kenyan protest culture (e.g. “M-Pigs” during the Occupy Parliament protests). Literary references like Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) and its Kiswahili translation *Shamba La Wanyama* (Kawegere, 1967) have cemented the pig as a metaphor for corrupt leadership. Through digital tools, Kenyan youth are building on this tradition, reimagining animal symbolism for a new era.

The grievances outlined here form the foundation of youth charges against the political class for breaching the social contract. The warthog, as a composite trickster and dupe, embodies all the negative traits ascribed to politicians and is presented as the ultimate monster—an ogre in the public imagination. Thus, the critique of Kasongo stands as an indictment of the entire political establishment.

While interpretations may vary, Kasongo’s image—especially with the haunting “*mbona wewe*” lament—has been indelibly sullied. For Kenyan youth, he is the ultimate monster, ceaselessly lampooned for misbehavior ranging from lack of integrity to outright theft. The 8,384 shares associated with this theme underscore its resonance.

Locating Kasongo in socio-political discourse

Between 2024 and 2025, Kenya experienced two pivotal moments of youth-led upheaval: the *#RejectFinanceBill* protests of June 25, 2024, and the June 25, 2025 youth demonstrations. These events, rooted both in the physical streets of urban centres and in digitally imagined communities, were primarily driven by Gen-Z but also drew in Millennials and even younger cohorts. This article focuses on the digital sphere, examining how, in critical moments, youth harnessed the power of popular culture—especially TikTok—to assert their presence and stake claims in fiercely contested national debates. The socio-political context of this period thus provides the backdrop for interpreting the Kasongo memes.

Popular culture offers a key lens through which to understand people’s fears, hopes, and aspirations. One reason for its significance is its fluidity and adaptability: it can readily absorb and rework elements from diverse genres, historical moments, and global flows (Barber 1997; [Newell & Okome 2014](#); Nyairo 2005; Wa Mungai 2013; Hannerz 1996). This process has become increasingly localised, with Kenyan practitioners continually appropriating, remixing, and pushing the boundaries of expressive forms. Memes, as digital artefacts, are particularly suited for this practice, allowing users to deploy familiar symbols in new and immediate ways. The malleability of popular culture ensures both its timeliness and its enduring relevance—particularly in the Kenyan TikTok space, where locally resonant texts are reimagined to reflect current realities. The potency of these ideas lies in their grounding in shared cultural references, making them immediately legible and impactful to Kenyan audiences.

TikTok and the repurposing of popular archives: New(er) modes of storytelling

Since its global launch in 2017, TikTok has rapidly become a major platform among Kenyan users. Digital technology has profoundly transformed how young people connect, share, and mobilize. By March 2025, an estimated 93% of Kenyans aged 13 to 60 (including Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X) were active on social media—with TikTok rising in popularity just behind WhatsApp and Facebook (Geopoll, 2025). The Geopoll Kenya country report notes that while traditional media like TV and radio still exist, they have been eclipsed by digital networks. With internet penetration so widespread, social media has become

the new mass media—an essential layer of Kenyan life that bridges gender and generational divides. The viral, decentralised nature of platforms like TikTok means content can spread quickly, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and allowing for a diversity of voices. Younger users, including children, gravitate toward TikTok over older, more mainstream apps such as *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and *X*, which are seen as less dynamic or innovative.

Structure and style of TikTok videos

TikTok videos are typically short, ranging from five seconds to just over a minute, and prioritise visual storytelling over written content. The integration of artificial intelligence into video creation has accelerated production and democratised content creation. Most of the videos studied here are simple AI-driven sketches set in minimalist scenes, featuring a single central character—often Kasongo, depicted as a warthog. This choice is a deliberate act of political satire, blending cultural metaphors, musical references, and technological innovation to sidestep censorship and amplify critique. The videos are intentionally raw, lacking elaborate plots or character development, and convey direct messages through voice-overs or superimposed text. They draw heavily on local humour, current events, and recognisable quirks—making them instantly relatable to Kenyan audiences.

TikTok empowers users to insert their own images, voices, or emojis at the heart of their content, giving youth unprecedented agency to tell their own stories. This is especially significant in contexts where narrative control has traditionally belonged to the state or powerful cultural institutions such as western cinema (Harding, 2003:71; Wa Mungai, 2008: 62).

As a creative medium, TikTok foregrounds individual agency and collective participation, enabling users to generate ideas and meaning within a shared digital space. These unfiltered, rule-breaking videos reflect local priorities: the use of vernacular languages, such as Sheng or mother tongues, serves both to challenge linguistic hierarchies and to assert cultural identity. In essence, TikTok creators document and share the lived realities and daily experiences of Kenyan youth, making digital storytelling an extension and account of their everyday ‘life-world’ (Hannerz, 1996).

An urgent matter of agency

TikTok has rapidly emerged as a powerful platform for uninhibited, alternative expression among Kenyan youth, offering a space that is both contemporary and deeply local while also challenging dominant narratives and established forms. TikTok memes are not just fleeting jokes—they are carefully curated, shared, and reimagined in ways that reflect and shape young people’s lived experiences. A persistent question echoes across contemporary Kenyan youth culture: “Despite this country’s vast promise, why are things not working for me and other young people?”⁶ TikTok’s popularity is thus best seen as part of a wider effort by young citizens to interrogate local realities and seek explanations for their frustrations. This helps explain why certain themes gain traction at particular moments, sparking surges of creative video production around specific issues.

The rise of digital technology has made platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and others exceptionally potent for reworking and reviving historical and cultural artefacts, especially music. On YouTube, for example, producers have revived old vinyl records by transforming them into new videos with original or substitute performers, enabling older generations to reconnect with their musical past and indulge in nostalgia through digital means⁷. TikTok, in turn, empowers a new generation of creators to breathe life into

forgotten, obscure, or previously niche texts and songs. This creative revival extends into Kenya's nightlife, where DJs and bands routinely play *Kasongo* at midnight, illustrating how music fosters collective bonds. The cycle of cultural reinterpretation is ongoing: Les Wanyika's '*Sina Makosa*', for instance, has been reimagined as a critique of the state and it has become a staple of the nightclub scene, further blurring artistic and political boundaries⁸.

Kenyan youth's critical engagement with social and political issues is part of a longstanding tradition of artistic expression as public commentary (Perullo, 2011; Parsitau, 2020). What sets the current moment apart is not the impulse to critique, but the innovative forms that these critiques now take—hybrid, digital, and deeply participatory.

Kasongo Memes: From Social Text to Political Currency

Today, the value of the *Kasongo* song lies in its transformation from a social lament into a vessel for humour and pointed political critique. Kenyan youth have reimagined the song's message, using it as a framework to satirise pressing issues such as government corruption, repression, over-taxation, and the plunder of public resources. The song provides the scaffolding for a vibrant meme culture, where each TikTok creation reflects a unique grievance or facet of what many see as a broken social contract between the government and its citizens.

Kasongo's persona—originally rooted in personal betrayal—becomes, in the hands of TikTok creators, a springboard into the rich world of Kenyan folklore. This explains the wide variety of animal avatars, each embodying negative traits and carrying the name *Kasongo*. Folklore, produced outside official channels, legitimises popular culture as a space for creative critique (Barber, 1997a). Drawing from Bakhtin's ideas on the grotesque (Bakhtin 1984), TikTok memes exaggerate flaws, distort forms, and use animal symbolism to lampoon those in power. The grotesque style—marked by excess, transformation, and satirical bodily imagery—enables creators to make the political elite appear not just ridiculous, but truly objectionable. The *Kasongo* silhouette's misshapen head or the recurring warthog character are prime examples of this subversive technique.

The educational system's emphasis on folklore—through English and Kiswahili syllabi and extensive university study—has primed Kenyan youth for this kind of symbolic critique. Trickster and dupe characters are well known, and *Kasongo*'s antics often invite viewers to question his supposed cleverness. Animal imagery—warthog, lion, giraffe, cheetah, wild dog, hyena—offers shorthand for negative attributes, making political critique accessible and resonant. By leveraging these familiar figures, creators obfuscate direct criticism while encouraging audiences to recognise uncomfortable truths about those in power.

Kasongo memes have gained traction thanks to their recognizability and versatility across platforms like TikTok, X, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The '*Kasongo* silhouettes' by Kibet Bull, for instance, use simple outlines to depict government misdeeds—immediately recognisable even when no names are given, thanks to their grounding in the visual language of editorial cartoons.

To remain relevant, TikTok creators closely reference current political discourse, often incorporating politicians' actual statements or actions. The performative and exhibitionist nature of Kenyan politics makes politicians easy targets: their public personas and utterances provide endless material for satire.

Youth closely track these developments, using creative expression to explore whether their own aspirations are being met. Everyday reality, filtered through humour and irony, becomes fodder for meme production. The repurposing of Kasongo as a meme demonstrates how popular culture can amplify local knowledge within global digital spaces. By recontextualising a familiar song and infusing it with references to folklore and global literary classics like *Animal Farm*, Kenyan youth situate their activism within broader struggles for social justice and equity. Kasongo memes thus foster dialogue across cultures, offering insight into lived experiences and shared values—while also imagining what a fairer, more connected world might look like. Placing their local life-worlds at the centre of TikTok content, young Kenyans assert agency and invite examination of the many forms of knowledge production that shape contemporary African society (Cooper & Morrell, 2014). Kasongo’s enduring appeal is not in its lyrics but in its continual reimagining—its “life-worlding”—by new generations. Through TikTok, creators blend nostalgia with urgent relevance, fusing past and present into a powerful tool for contemporary social commentary.

Discussion

Kenyan youth’s creative expression on TikTok is less about articulating grand philosophies and more about capturing the everyday realities and frustrations that define their lives. Rather than focusing on sweeping statements, these creators spotlight the mundane details—the neglect of government responsibilities, disregard for human life, corruption, hypocrisy, social inequality, and the ostentatious lifestyles of public officials. Collectively, these snapshots form a vivid, composite portrait of perceived governance failures and provide insight into what it means to navigate daily life under such conditions. Through banter, irony, and satire, TikTok memes allow ordinary citizens to critique society, using humour to expose state excesses and set the terms for challenging violations of the social contract.

The evolution of Kasongo as a meme underscores how cultural artifacts continuously adapt and acquire new meanings in response to shifting contexts. This process marks a significant epistemic shift: contemporary content creators are now at the forefront of knowledge transmission and tradition-making. By harnessing popular imagination, the creators of Kasongo memes employ innovative ways of knowing and storytelling that center local producers. They expand upon traditional notions of textuality—where “text” is no longer limited to writing, but now encompasses music, folklore, memory, visual imagery, and digital soundscapes. Studying these memes reveals how intertextual relationships between the “traditional” and the contemporary generate fuller, more nuanced understandings of popular culture. Crucially, governance issues are woven into the fabric of these creative works, saturating them with political meaning. In this way, Kenyan youth have rendered a local classic, *Kasongo*, newly relevant—transforming its focus on family values into a sharp, collective critique of Kenya’s political landscape. Popular culture thus becomes a space for validating experiences and perspectives marginalised by official narratives, with TikTok content creators finding solace and solidarity in shared critique. By analysing the references and symbols invoked, we move beyond reading these works as mere texts and instead explore their broader social and cultural significance.

For Kenyan youth, repurposing familiar texts offers a way to process contemporary anxieties and uncertainties. In reaching back to the past, they find comfort and resonance in nostalgia, even as they reimagine classic narratives for new contexts—such as turning an old song into a viral TikTok meme. This process is inherently collaborative and iterative: memes are appropriated, adapted, and re-deployed by other users, each adding their own critique or interpretation (as in the Kasongo-infused versions of Les Wanyika’s *Sina Makosa*). Kasongo memes gain traction because they make indigenous knowledge—

local music and folklore—accessible while simultaneously updating it to address current social and political realities. The revival of older texts involves selecting, editing, and redeploying cultural artifacts to fit contemporary needs, often stripping them of their original context and investing them with new meanings. This creative adaptation not only breathes new life into familiar symbols but also sparks debate about their relevance. For example, the Orwellian pig—long a metaphor for corruption and power—finds a new home alongside Kasongo the warthog. By evoking past cultural references, creators inspire innovation and fresh artistic expression. The transformation of Kasongo—from a song about a domestic visit into a series of sharp TikTok caricatures—illustrates how appropriation fosters continuity and a sense of shared cultural heritage.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that *Kasongo*, an old musical text, has become a potent referent in Kenyan popular culture today, and how it has been recuperated from local cultural archives, decontextualized and redeployed afresh to speak to a new socio-political context. Central to this process has been the digital culture of TikTok, in which Kenyan youth symbolically address perceived failures of governance enacted by the political class. Kasongo the warthog, arrogant and disrespectful but also resilient against many odds, becomes a crucial metaphor in the critique of bad government. Nevertheless, he is a complex character who cannot be easily reduced to either a trickster or a dupe. His chief failing, however, is that he spends too much effort trying to save himself from what appears to be self-inflicted trouble. By seizing the digital space on TikTok, Kenyan youth have claimed agency that the state would ordinarily deny. By digitally visualizing ideas of what they consider governance failures and their socio-political predicament, they write their stories into the Kenyan public discourse.

By examining the probable motivations of the contemporary performers, we can better understand the power dynamics at play in the repurposing of cultural material and the circumstances under which this occurs. Moments of crisis provide popular culture practitioners with a springboard for (re)creation. Thus we might be able to study and illuminate how voices and perspectives have been either silenced or amplified in the process of reimagining the past. The fact that the TikTok form is interactive allows viewers of a particular video to make their own video in response to what they have just viewed. In this way, audiences become co-creators, relying mainly on intertextual referencing and the framing of video content in a process of metacommentary.

The connection between digital popular culture texts (music and memes) and antecedent Kenyan folkloric material has also been demonstrated, revealing an intertextual process that may account for the current popularity of TikTok videos. Kenyan youth are sufficiently familiar with dupes and tricksters in the folklore of various local communities to recognize how these character templates can be applied to social-political critique. As such, the video producers seem to be all too aware that their creative work is not just about the political situation in the country but is also, simultaneously, reflexive praxis. This assessment accounts for the similarities in motifs across the multiplicity of Kasongo memes on TikTok, which, as parodic texts, subjectively (re)produce the subject of their own critique.

Endnotes

(Endnotes)

- 1 The authors acknowledge Dismas Nkezabera's assistance in clarifying the translation.
- 2 In street language the word 'marriage' was the popular characterization of the merger of the political parties KANU and NDP in 2002 as well as the co-option of Raila Odinga into the government headed by Uhuru Kenyatta in 2018, and later the administration of William Ruto in 2024.
- 3 The term is rooted in 17th and 18th Century philosophical thought, and we recognize that there are competing definitions of what the 'social contract' is in practice. Here it is used in the sense in which it refers to democratic practice that aims at achieving an equitable society within the purview of social justice (See UNDP 2016:9).
- 4 Memes take many forms—song, symbol, picture, sound, name, amongst others. They are clippings from other spatial-temporal contexts and form a global cultural pool circulated through the mediascape; their redeployment involves both decontextualization and recontextualization. For a full discussion of how memes operate in global popular cultural flows, see particularly Hannerz (1996).
- 5 Personal communication.
- 6 Between them, Juliani's 'Utawala' (2013) Wainaina's 'Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo' (2001) and Mashifta's *System ya Majambazi* (2000) acutely map the contours of the problem of youth discontent in Kenya.
- 7 See Johnstone Ouko Mukabi's digital rendition of his father George Mukabi's 1950s composition 'Mtoto Si Nguo'. Them Mushrooms, a popular Kenyan band, released their own version of the song in their 1994 compilation of Kenyan classics. Elsewhere *Nairobi City Ensemble* have done a cover version of Ben Blastus O'Bulawayo's 'Someni Vijana', a popular song officially used in Kenya's schools radio broadcasts since 1958, which is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3euY3eLj_Ac.
- 8 TikTok content creators seem to be aware of the endless play that can be brought into the signification processes of their expressive acts. Les Wanyika's song 'Sina Makosa' is also the template for the parody in a religious song where Kasongo is interchanged with 'shetani', the devil. In her secular composition, for instance, Lydia Ndude seems to be fusing the already-familiar Kasongo image with Sina Makosa by mimicking religious-sounding scriptures that liberally evoke images of the moral struggle between good ('mungu') and bad ('shetani') in the Kenyan socio-political context. See <https://www.tiktok.com/@hoodtv59/video/7515733326511099141> and <https://www.tiktok.com/@kavutzi/video/7478049056497945861?q=sina%20makosa%20kasongo&t=1761217681799>

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