

Challenging power through social media: A review of selected memes of Robert Mugabe's fall

ABSTRACT

Robert Mugabe has ruled Zimbabwe since independence in 1980. However, in recent years, he has faced serious resistance from ordinary citizens. This article examines subversive internet memes that were created by ordinary Zimbabweans and posted on social media in the aftermath of Robert Mugabe's collapse at the Harare International airport on 4 February 2015. Firstly, the study reads internet memes of the Mugabe fall as forms of resistance to the regime. Secondly, it interrogates the methods that internet memes use to challenge official discourse. Thirdly, the study critically analyses the various ways in which internet meme creators imagine and represent Zimbabwe under the Mugabe regime. The article argues that internet memes of the "Mugabe fall" express subversive views that undermine the regime through humour, exaggeration, satire and other stylistic devices. Internet memes present an alternative discourse that counters the official narrative promoted by the regime.

Rodwell Makombe is a Lecturer in the Department of English Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of the Free State. His areas of research interest are postcolonial literary and cultural studies. Grace Temiloluwa Agbede is a PhD student in the Department of Language Practice at Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of digital technology has ushered in new ways by which citizens can challenge power. Traditional methods of speaking truth to power such as demonstrations, strikes and petitions are increasingly being replaced, or in some cases complemented, by digital resistance. Although internet memes are conceived and distributed for different purposes, this article considers internet memes as tools that can be used by ordinary people to challenge oppressive regimes. To be more specific, this study focuses on internet memes that were developed and distributed in the aftermath of Robert Mugabe's fall at Harare International Airport on 4 February 2015. Mugabe's fall, which was captured on camera and distributed online in spite of efforts to censor it, attracted worldwide attention particularly on the internet. This article focuses on selected internet memes that were produced by internet users imitating the original image of Mugabe's fall. Questions posed in this article are: In what ways are memes of Mugabe's fall expressions of resistance to his regime? What methods do specific memes of the fall use to challenge the official discourse of the Mugabe regime? How do internet users, through their construction of Mugabe fall memes, imagine and represent Zimbabwe under the Mugabe regime? Guided by these questions, the article analyses selected memes of the Mugabe fall as expressions of resistance to the regime. However, resistance in the context of this article is not only limited to oppositional confrontation but also includes strategic co-existence with the regime.

1. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study that deploys a purposive sampling technique to identify data that is relevant to the objectives of the study. Memes, in the form of videos and images, analysed in this study were selected through an internet search using the key words "Mugabe Fall Memes". The search revealed 390 000 results, with links to sites such as "know your meme", Twitter, Facebook and other discussion forums. The six memes that are analysed in this study were purposively selected because of their relevance to the objectives of the study and the incident under scrutiny – Mugabe's fall of 14 February 2015. A sampling of the bulk of the memes obtained through the internet search revealed two broad categories: global and local memes. Local memes tended to represent Mugabe's fall in the context of the social, political and economic situation in Zimbabwe, while global memes represented the fall in the context of events and developments on the international net-scape. In view of this, memes that were circulated in relation to Mugabe's fall can be broadly categorised as local memes (concerned with the social, political and economic conditions in Zimbabwe) and global memes (concerned with how Mugabe's fall was represented on the global arena). This study, however, focuses on local memes in order to examine how ordinary Zimbabweans used internet memes to comment on Mugabe's fall and express their views on the regime. Six local memes were purposively selected and analysed on the basis of their relevance to the questions raised in this study.

1.1 Theorising memes

The term 'meme' was first coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976; 2006) to refer to small cultural units of transmission, analogous to genes, which are spread by copying or imitation (Shifman, 2013:188). In his original formulation, Dawkins conceptualised a meme as an idea, a thought, or a concept which can be passed between minds (Buchel, 2012:16). Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (Dawkins, 2006:192). Some theorists, for example Cloak (1975), have made a distinction between the cultural instructions in people's heads (which he called *i-culture*) and the behaviour, technology, or social organisation that memes produce (which he called *m-culture*) (Blackmore, 2001:230). This study is particularly interested in the social landscape that memes produce. Memes are often compared to viruses which need a host (carrier) in order to replicate. Blackmore (in Buchel, 2012:19) argues that 'When you imitate someone else, something is passed on ... We might call this thing an idea, an instruction, a behavior, a piece of information ...'.

The notion of 'internet meme' is a hijacking of the original idea by Dawkins which was intended to explain the propagation of genes. Instead of mutating by random chance, internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014:6). According to Bauchhage (in Buchel, 2012:29), internet memes refer to 'phenomena that rapidly gain popularity or notoriety on the Internet. Often, modifications or spoofs add to the profile of the original idea thus turning it into a phenomenon that transgresses social and cultural boundaries'. Internet memes are often humorous imitations of some product or concept (Buchel, 2012:30). In the vernacular discourse of netizens, the phrase "internet meme" is commonly applied to describe the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumours, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet. According to this popular notion, an internet meme may spread in its original form but it often also spawns user-created derivatives (Shifman, 2013:362).

Internet memes can also be conceptualised as messages transmitted by consumers–producers for discursive purposes. The content of internet memes is almost always anonymously generated and shared virally via (virtual) word of mouth. Generally, internet memes seek to interpret or ask questions about certain issues in the physical society. On the surface, internet memes appear rudimentary, as some are in the form of jokes, humorous statements or even vulgar images. However, "every joke is a tiny revolution" (Orwell, in Chung: 2011) because each viral joke can subvert the status quo in a variably subtle or overt fashion.

1.2 The anatomy of Memes

Buchel (2012:19-20) quoting Blackmore (1994) identifies three characteristics of memes, which are in fact based on Dawkins' (1976) characterisation of genes. The first one is *variation*, which upholds the view that stories are rarely told exactly the same way twice. Second is *selection*, which encapsulates the view that some memes grab attention more than others, and are more likely to be remembered and passed on to other people while others fail to get copied at all. Third is *retention*, which refers to the durability of ideas or behaviours propagated by a meme. Something of the original meme must be retained for us to call it imitation. Dawkins (1976) identifies these same characteristics as *fidelity*, which refers to the view that the core idea should remain intact in order for the meme to be successful (Buchel, 2012:20), *fecundity*, which refers to how rapidly the meme can replicate and lastly, *longevity*, which speaks to how long a particular meme can survive. Sometimes the survival of memes depends on their utility to the community in which they are nurtured; however, memes do not need to be useful in order to survive. Shifman (2013:365) identifies three attributes of memes. First, memes may best be understood as cultural information that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon. Secondly, memes reproduce by various means of imitation. Thirdly, memes diffuse through competition and selection.

Memes are usually compared to genes and viruses. The meme-as-virus analogy takes epidemiology as its model. It considers memes as cultural equivalents of flu bacilli, transmitted through the communicational equivalents of sneezes (Alvarez, in Shifman, 2013:365). The meme-as-gene metaphor implies a vertical transmission from generation to generation inside a certain population, and in a determined environment (Diaz, 2013:90). From an epidemiological point of view, a meme can be transmitted horizontally; that is in the same generation, to several agents belonging to one or different groups, inside or outside a specific environment (Diaz, 2013:90). This metaphor has been used in a problematic way because it assumes that people are helpless and passive creatures, susceptible to the domination of meaningless media "snacks" that infect their minds (Jenkins, in Shifman, 2013:366). However, the fact of the matter is that memes are created by humans with a mind and agency. This article seeks to demonstrate how internet memes have been appropriated by Zimbabwean netizens to resist and subvert the Mugabe regime. In the context of the repressive political environment in Zimbabwe, internet memes have become an avenue through which frustrated citizens interrogate the excesses of the Mugabe regime.

Distin (2005:44) argues that memes may be described as both self-assertive and integrative. They are self-assertive in that they have a personality or a "life" of their own. They are also integrative in that they do best when they fit in with the relevant public discourse. Distin (2005:45) further notes that information is more likely to be *replicated* if it is absorbed into a network of accepted ideas or is useful in the context of much-used skills: we would rather pass things on when we approve of them than when we do not. Thus, memes will be acquired

and retained if they are compatible with the existing assembly of knowledge of the recipient. In the light of this, it makes sense to say that memetic success will depend on three separate factors: the content of the meme itself; the way in which it fits with other memes; and the external environment – the minds and surroundings of the people whose attention it is trying to attain (Distin, 2005:57). A new meme that contradicts an idea which is not so fundamental to the assembly – one that is not too deeply entrenched – has a better chance of success than a novelty that is in conflict with a “keystone” meme (Distin, 2005:60-61).

The memetic practice is not merely an expression of existing social cultural norms – it is also a social tool for negotiating them. Thus, in addition to reflecting norms, memes also constitute a central practice in their formation (Gal, Shifman & Zohar, 2015:3). Internet memes are “performative acts”, in that each selective choice reflects a specific attitude of the meme creator (Gal et al., 2015:3). Thus, choosing to post a particular meme in a particular digital arena co-constructs individuals and collectives. In many cases, memes tend to reflect the socio-demographic background of meme creators. Memes of Robert Mugabe's fall discussed in this study constitute a corpus of digital items based on imitation, in which numerous participants create new versions with awareness of previous ones, preserving and altering various elements in the process (Gal et al., 2015:4). According to the three dimensional model for meme analysis, participants joining a discourse may choose to imitate one or more of the three dimensions of the original text: content, form, and stance (Shifman, in Gal et al., 2015:4). This study examines the extent to which users have transformed these dimensions in constructing a digital image of Robert Mugabe either in compliance with or in subversion of obtaining discourses.

Alongside Shifman (2011), this study foregrounds human agency as an integral part of the conceptualisation of memes. Memes are dynamic entities that spread in response to technological, cultural and social choices made by people (Shifman, 2011:189). The dissemination of memes is based on intentional agents with decision-making powers. This conceptualisation of people as active agents is highly appropriate for understanding how memes travel on the digital highway, particularly when examining cases in which the initial meaning of a meme is dramatically altered in the course of its diffusion (Shifman, 2013:366). In addition, the internet's flexibility, ubiquitous presence and accessibility enable users to transform existing memes and create new ones very easily.

1.3 Robert Mugabe memes: a video perspective

The following section presents examples of memes that have been created and posted on social media in the form of pictures (images) of Robert Mugabe's fall. The memes have been broadly categorised as local and global. Local memes imagine Mugabe's fall in the context of events (mainly political and economic) obtaining in Zimbabwe. While some memes present a serious indictment of the political and economic system in Zimbabwe, others are simply comic representations that seek to ridicule the regime through humour. For example,

some memes represent the Mugabe fall as a kind of dance, which is already trending on the internet as “Mugabe dance”, while others mock the official discourse that depicts Mugabe as an energetic old man – “the young old Mugabe” – by reconstituting the fall as a “border jumping” leap into South Africa. Global memes, on the other hand, situate Robert Mugabe’s fall in the context of events and personalities in the global arena. Generally, these memes tend to imagine different scenarios of the Mugabe fall by associating the “falling posture” with similar postures by personalities such as footballers, dancers, surfers and athletes. Hence, there are memes of Mugabe dancing with ‘single ladies’, after Beyonce’s popular song, and memes of Mugabe competing at the Olympics. The scenarios are still based on the original image of the fall, but they attempt to situate the fall in a global context.

This article particularly focuses on local memes. As indicated earlier, local memes are constructed against the backdrop of political and socio-economic conditions obtaining in Zimbabwe. It should be highlighted at this point that unlike genes (the biological counterpart of memes) that propagate themselves mindlessly, internet memes are deliberate creations of the human mind. They express the mind of the meme-creator vis-à-vis events obtaining in his/her environment. This is why the question of agency is central in this study. Internet memes can be used as tools of “resistance” to oppressive regimes because they allow meme creators to interpret events from their own perspective. Although the rest of the article will focus on memetic images of the Mugabe fall, I want to start by analysing a video of the Mugabe fall which provides some background to the incident. This video is available on YouTube and it was produced by The Young Turks¹.

On the 4th of February 2015, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe returned from Ethiopia where he had assumed the rotating chairmanship of the African Union. He was welcomed by supporters of the ruling party at Harare International Airport amidst victory celebrations. In official narratives, Mugabe’s assumption of the AU chairmanship was seen as confirmation that Africa was behind Zimbabwe’s anti-Western stance. However, those on the opposition side could not understand how a 91-year-old could be entrusted with such a high profile demanding position. Therefore, when the President fell, soon after having addressed a crowd of jubilant supporters, it was a blow to his public image. In some circles, the fall was interpreted as confirmation that Mugabe was not fit, either to run Zimbabwe or take up the new position at the AU.

The video entitled “Dictator Trips, Gets Meme’d, Then Gets REVENGE”² clearly captures the circumstances around this incident. The video is a five minute clip that portrays the fall and the official response to it. It captures how security agents desperately tried to prevent journalists from covering the incident. The video also parodies the manner in which Mugabe’s security personnel were “dismissed” for failing to protect their master from falling. In a comic way, the video highlights the alleged disregard for human rights in Zimbabwe. It also mocks

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1txITgNiy4Q>- video of Robert Mugabe’s fall

² A video by The Young Turks, available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1txITgNiy4Q>

Mugabe's cabinet, particularly George Charamba, the Presidential spokesman and Jonathan Moyo, the then Minister of Information, Media and Broadcasting Services who justified the dismissal of security personnel on the pretext that they were negligent. The irony is that the two officials put all the blame on "negligent security personnel" while deliberately ignoring Mugabe's age (91), a fact which, in all probability, could have been responsible for the fall.

The video is accompanied by music and humorous comments from a comic presenter, Cenk Uygur. The humour is drawn from prevailing discourses on Mugabe's leadership and thus appeals to audiences that are familiar with these discourses. The video is also based on what is known, stereotypically, about dictators in general and in this context. Mugabe's behaviour (the attempt to censor journalists and the suspension of bodyguards) typifies the sense of insecurity that haunts dictators. The basic assumption in this video, as implied in its title, is that Mugabe is a dictator. Hence, throughout the clip, he is referred to as "the dictator of Zimbabwe". This short video clip parodies Robert Mugabe and portrays him as a heartless dictator who has lost his sense of humour. It highlights the excesses of the regime and mocks the way Mugabe is deified by supporters within his party. This is evidenced by the attempt to censor the Presidential fall and apportion blame to security guards. Dictators tend to see themselves as invincible; as a result, they do all in their power to prove this point.

Contrary to the "people first" rhetoric of the Mugabe regime, the video portrays Mugabe as self-centred. The fact that security personnel were suspended for failing to prevent his fall suggests that Mugabe has been elevated to the status of a god whose "fall" demands a sacrifice. In fact, the fall is not his fault but a result of negligence on the part of his bodyguards. However, the fact of the matter is that falling is a normal "human" experience and no one deserves to be blamed for it. This incident is reminiscent of the way Kin Jong Un (the North Korean leader) ordered the public execution of an army general for dozing off during a parade. Cenk Uygur, the comic presenter of the video, imagines Mugabe "the dictator of Zimbabwe" saying to his security guards: "You should have been at that event and you should have held me up before I tripped". Interestingly, it is not only Mugabe who blames security for his fall. Officials in the ruling party also believe that security were caught napping because "they are the bullet takers and according to the rules they must be at least 3 metres close to the President" and "they should never take their eyes off him". It does not occur to the officials that Mugabe is not young anymore (91) and that at his age, he is likely to lose his balance and fall. This memetic video lampoons the official discourse that represents Mugabe as a young old man, 91 in years but 25 in spirit. The fall mocks such discourses and reminds us that, in spite of all the propaganda, the dictator is still human after all.

The video also mocks government officials in the Mugabe regime, particularly Jonathan Moyo and George Charamba, who adamantly refused to acknowledge Mugabe's age as a possible cause of the fall. Granted, security has a duty to protect the President; however, when the President is walking on 91-year-old legs, surely he should, to some extent, take responsibility for his own anatomy. Although the way Mugabe fell was funny, "the picture looked like he was surfing or something", the regime does not tolerate jokes. According to Cenk Uygur (the comedian presenter), the "91-year-old dictator of Zimbabwe does not like

jokes". This resonates with the way any kind of negative comments or crude jokes about the person of the President is illegal in Zimbabwe. In this context, laughter or mere indifference is blasphemous, not because people intend it so but because those in power consider it blasphemous (Mbembe, 1992:11). This insecurity that usually surrounds dictator regimes leads to excessive control of public opinion and disregard of freedom of expression. The arrogance of the Mugabe regime is underscored through a comment made by the Presidential spokesman, George Charamba, in which he said "there is only one hand that shakes up and that hand has not shaken up anything". This statement reveals that nothing is done in an oppressive regime without the approval of the dictator. This video can be conceptualised as a form of resistance to the Mugabe regime in that it gives internet users a platform to express views that cannot be expressed through official channels. More importantly, the video is humorous, hence it also acts as a conduit through which citizens can joke and laugh about issues that are otherwise prohibited.

1.4 Representing the falsehoods of the Mugabe regime

Achille Mbembe's work on the postcolony has shed some light on the way African leaders project themselves in the eyes of the ruled/citizens. According to Mbembe, the autocrat is a fetish and a semblance of perfection, a god who cannot make mistakes. A fetish is, among other things, an object which aspires to be made sacred; it demands power and seeks to maintain a close, intimate relationship with those who carry it (Coquet, in Mbembe, 1992). A fetish can also take the form of a talisman which one can call upon, honour and dread. In the postcolony, fetishistic power is invested not only in the person of the autocrat but also in the persons of the commandment and its agents -the party, policemen, soldiers, administrators and officials, middlemen and dealers (Mbembe, 1992:10).

Mbembe's theorisation aptly explains the behaviour of Mugabe's aids, particularly the manner in which they denied the fall in spite of evidence which was already available in the public domain. The Minister of Information, Media and Broadcasting Services, Professor Jonathan Moyo, said the President had managed to break the fall and that those who said he had fallen were imagining things. This refusal to accept facts and the insistence on another version of the truth is actually a reminder that in the postcolony, the state (incarnated in the person of the President) owns the truth. As Mbembe rightfully puts it, the state is "the upholder of the law and the keeper of the truth" (1992:5). The commandment – a word which Mbembe uses to refer to state machinery – controls the information that is disseminated to the public. The commandment has power to alter facts and present a version of events that is favourable to the regime. The meme below (a slight variation of the original image of Mugabe's fall) shows Mugabe tumbling to the ground in full view of his entourage. This image is close to the original, except for the caption "get up, there is a five-minute rule" that the meme-producer has added. The caption mocks Professor Jonathan Moyo's claim that the President managed to break the fall. The president cannot be asked to "get up" if he did not fall. The caption also highlights the double-speak within this regime. Contrary to official discourse that portrays Mugabe as healthy and energetic, the meme shows that Robert Mugabe is a mere mortal who can tumble and fall like any other human being.



<https://twitter.com/skaheru/status/563039659237052416/photo/1>

Although the pictures of men in black suits around a falling Mugabe may not carry much meaning, the addition of the words 'Get up there is a five-second rule', supposedly from one of Mugabe's officials, brings up issues around the way the Mugabe regime constructs the "truth" that it wants the public to consume. The point is that if Mugabe could stand up within five seconds, then in the regime's books, the fall never happened. This could perhaps explain why security officials attempted to stop journalists from leaking the pictures to the public. The producer of this meme (identified on Twitter as Simon Kaheru) is deliberately mocking the attempt by the regime to deny Mugabe's fall. If the Minister insists that the President did not fall, then by implication there is a rule within the ruling party which says that if one falls and gets up within five seconds, the fall is nullified. This interpretation is plausible, considering the manner in which the officials seem to watch the President without making any effort to rescue him. It is as if they are waiting for him to stand up so they can tell the world that the President "managed to break the fall".³ The message of the meme, which mocks the regime's tendency to portray Mugabe as healthy, foregrounds that Mugabe is indeed old; but to maintain his image as a 'young old man' he has to change the rules of falling. Evidently, the producer of

³ The then Minister of Information and Broadcasting Services, Jonathan Moyo, claimed that the President had managed to break the fall; see <http://nehandaradio.com/2015/02/05/moyo-blames-carpet-mugabe-fall/>

the meme is contesting official discourse in relation to the person of Robert Mugabe and what actually transpired on that day.

1.5 Representing the official discourse of the “young old” Mugabe



<http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-20351-Mugabe+fall+memes+flood+the+internet/news.aspx>

In official narratives of the ruling ZANU PF regime, Mugabe is portrayed as a young old man. This discourse has been constructed and promoted through stories of the President's self-discipline and routine exercises. Moreover, the President himself has described himself on several occasions as strong, like a 25-year-old. One can justifiably assume that this discourse explains why no aides were close enough to prevent the fateful fall. This false discourse is disseminated to the Zimbabwean population through pictures of a 91-year-old Mugabe walking unaided. The President's co-dancers in the meme above are members of the Zimbabwe Christian Church (ZCC), which is famous for its energetic, vibrant dances. The irony is that Mugabe, at 91, is still strong enough to compete with young men in the dance arena, which by analogy is the political arena. Considering the way Mugabe has managed to maintain a firm grip on Zimbabwean politics since 1980, the meme is perhaps depicting Zimbabwean politics as a dance arena where Mugabe remains the undisputed champion. His supremacy in the craft is spelt out through his attire (a tie and a suit) which is different

from that of the rest of the dancers. Other dancers are in fact uniformed, which suggests 'parrottry' and loyalty to the regime. At a metaphorical level, the dancers may represent ZANU PF supporters, all dressed alike, and following their leader's dancing antics. By and large, this representation is a mockery of official discourse, particularly the discourse of patriots that seeks to marshal every Zimbabwean into a uniform way of conceptualising nationalism. The notion of Zimbabwean politics as a uniformed dance arena suggests that Zimbabwe is now a militarised state in which everyone is compelled to follow in the steps of the lead dancer. In a military state, as it is in the image above, there seems to be no space for individuality; followers act as machines that automatically jump to keep in step with "His Excellency". Posted on public platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, such pictures provide a platform for Zimbabweans to laugh about the excesses of the regime. This is particularly important in a country where citizens are prohibited from making jokes about the person of the President. Social media has thus become a platform on which Zimbabweans share jokes, laugh and resist a regime which has, seemingly, proved to be invincible.

1.6 Representing the violence and impunity of the Mugabe regime

According to Distin (2005) memes are likely to survive if they portray issues that are in tandem with norms in a society. This is so because, like genes, memes compete for attention in the minds of consumers. In the context of Zimbabwe, memes that represent the person of the President and the state machinery are likely to attract attention because they articulate matters of public concern. In the meme below, the Mugabe fall has been reconstituted to harmonise it with events obtaining in Zimbabwe. The creator of this meme imagines Mugabe's falling posture as a desperate attempt by a citizen to escape the brutality of law enforcement agents. Clearly, the focus is not on making fun of the fall itself, as other memes have done, but to use the fall as a means to draw attention to the abuse of human rights in Zimbabwe. Evidently, there is an element of humour in this meme because it portrays the President as running away from the police, an experience which, of course, never happens to Mugabe, although it highlights the day to day realities of ordinary Zimbabweans. Imagining the President in this kind of situation is not only an attack on officialdom but also an effective way of highlighting the inhumanity of this practice. It is an appeal to the conscience of the President by situating him in the position of his victims. In other words, the meme-creator is asking Robert Mugabe how he would feel if he were to be subjected to this kind of brutality. However, it is also clear, as Mbembe (1992) has argued, that the preoccupation with the obscene and the grotesque in the postcolony is not only a form of resistance but also a form of illicit cohabitation with the oppressor. The point is that the meme-creator does not necessarily intend to change things by creating this meme, but to share the image with other internet users and laugh away the brutal experience. For most Zimbabweans, this is only a joke to be consumed without necessary thinking about transforming the police system.

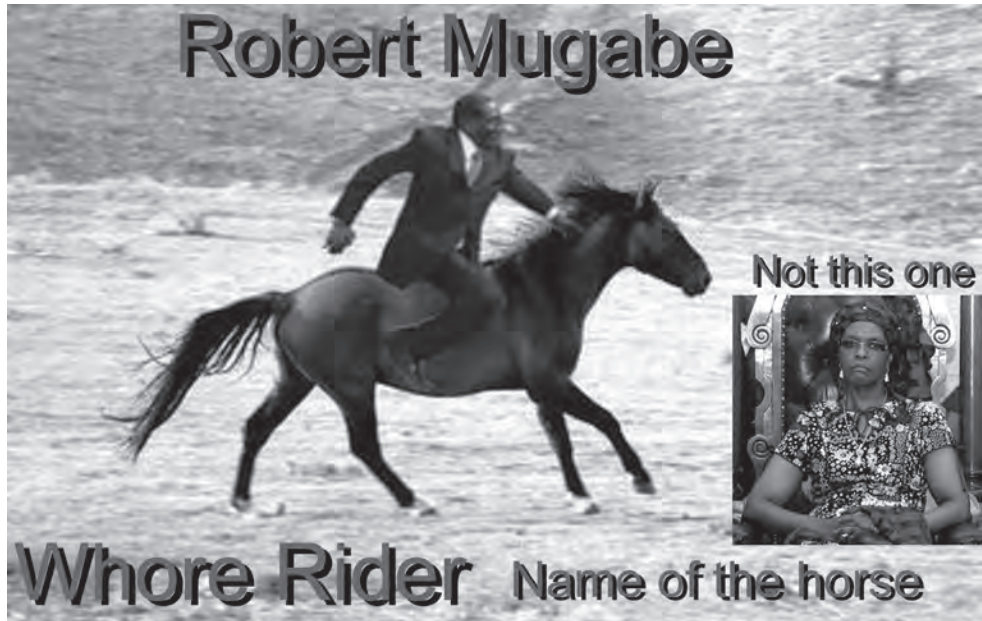


<https://twitter.com/xtiandela/status/563295309468827648/photo/1>

1.7 Representing the senile Mugabe who pretends to be in charge

Creating memes is not only an act of resistance but also a means through which the oppressed come to terms with the reality of their day-to-day experience. The meme-creator does not only rely on events in the immediate environment but also on his/her imagination. In the meme below, Robert Mugabe is portrayed as a horse rider. The notion of riding horses is usually associated with recreation as well as authority. One can think of the horse as Zimbabwe that Mugabe rides as he pleases without any qualms about accountability. The name of the horse “Whore rider” has connotations of immorality. However, the meme-creator is quick to point out that he/she does not mean the President’s wife “not this one”. This representation draws from

discourses that have depicted Mugabe's wife, Grace, as a whore and a gold digger who does not have the interests of the country at heart. Perhaps these discourses are built on the fact that Grace was formerly a secretary to the President, who in fact fell in love with her before Sally, Mugabe's first wife, died.



<http://a.disquscdn.com/uploads/mediaembed/images/1771/2949/original.jpg>

To say "not this one" is actually an attempt to focus the readers' attention on her. This picture was posted on Disqus, a social networking site where internet users share and comment on stories that happen in Zimbabwe. Mugabe is pictured as the whore rider to mock his rather indecent relationship with Grace, his wife, who is over forty years younger than him. The idea of Mugabe riding a horse at his age suggests, as the official discourse would say, that he is still strong and capable of running the country. However, the picture of his wife sitting on the throne suggests that she is in charge. He, as the President, is a figurehead remotely controlled by his wife.

1.8 The dictator does not care: Mugabe dancing in the midst of poverty

Although most Zimbabweans are aware that the Zimbabwean economy has collapsed, as witnessed by high unemployment rates and burgeoning numbers of street vendors, not many can freely express disgruntlement with the incumbent regime. The image below depicts Robert Mugabe dancing with semi-naked kids in a dusty, untarred road. While the nakedness

may imply the conditions of poverty prevailing in Zimbabwe, Mugabe's attitude (dancing in the midst of poverty) could suggest that his regime has become insensitive to the plight of the poor. The fact that the kids are also smiling could suggest that children growing up under these deplorable conditions tend to internalise their predicament because this is the only Zimbabwe that they know. Arguably, one could say that there is a new generation of Zimbabweans (the born frees) who know nothing except the world created by Robert Mugabe and the ZANU PF regime. In a comic way, the creator of this meme uses it as a scathing indictment of the callousness of the Mugabe regime, which, over the years, particularly in the post 2000 period, has done very little to address the needs of the poor. In fact, the regime has birthed a young generation of poverty-stricken children, who, to make matters worse, can afford a smile in the midst of poverty.



<https://www.facebook.com/ZimbabweanDictatorShipFunnyJokes/>

1.9 Representing Mugabe as a hypocrite

Robert Mugabe, has, in recent times, been depicted as a president who rules from the sky because of his love of travelling. In fact, Mugabe barely misses an event be it in the sub-region, in Africa or around the world. Such appetite for the outside world has been interpreted as an acknowledgement that Zimbabwe has become un-inhabitable. The meme below taps into this discourse by portraying Robert Mugabe as an illegal immigrant or border jumper. This picture is contextually situated in the discourse of migration in Zimbabwe. Since the beginning of the political and economic crisis, many Zimbabweans have migrated to neighbouring countries, particularly South Africa and Botswana. The term “border jumper” in the Zimbabwean context refers to illegal migrants who skip the Zimbabwean border into South Africa, Botswana and Namibia (to mention but a few) in search of greener pastures. The words “I agree, let’s get out of this country” mocks the hypocrisy of the Mugabe regime which claims to promote home-grown, anti-western policies, while the President and other politicians obtain better services elsewhere. The hashtag “no future” foregrounds the unwritten consensus between government officials and the general public that Zimbabwe, in its current economic state, has no future. While in the previous meme, Zimbabwean roads were portrayed as untarred and dusty, in this one the road on the other side of the razor wire is tarred, which speaks of better economic conditions outside Zimbabwe. One should, however, note that Zimbabwean migrants are not all that welcome in neighbouring countries, as depicted by the razor wire erected to keep them out.



2. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that memes are an effective means through which ordinary people can “resist” oppressive regimes. The notion of resistance presented in this article is premised on Mbembe’s (1992) notion of resistance as cohabitation rather than oppositional confrontation. Memes are units of cultural transmission that spread from mind to mind through the process of imitation. Unlike genes, their biological counterparts, that propagate themselves through the natural process of reproduction, memes are deliberately created by human beings for particular functions. It is for this reason that internet memes can be used as means to subvert oppressive regimes. This article has identified two categories of memes on Robert Mugabe’s fall, namely local and global memes. Global memes represent the Mugabe fall in the context of events and personalities on the international arena while local memes represent the fall in light of Zimbabwe’s domestic challenges. Meme creation as a form of “resistance” may not have the same effect as direct, oppositional resistance; however, it is effective for those, particularly ordinary people, who wish to challenge the system without disclosing their identity and putting themselves at risk. Since internet memes represent a piece of the world as perceived by the meme-producer, they are a powerful means by which ordinary people resist oppression. In view of this, memes can be conceptualised as couriers of ordinary people’s views and concerns.

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