# The Contagious Other: Virality and Anxiety in Congolese Memes Lesley Nicole Braun

Afbeelding met persoon, person, binnen

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 1 caption translation: Have you protected yourself? The wearing of dirty bills on one’s face resonates with current global mask mandates, as expressed in the caption's call to 'protect yourself.'[[1]](#footnote-1)

Two banknotes cover the mouth and eyes of a Congolese young man who is seated in front of a religious poster made in China. His shirt is emblazoned with the flag of Zaire – the Democratic Republic of Congo’s former name under the three-decade dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko. The caption: "Have you protected yourself? I have". He is a meme-maker. Viral content like memes offer a unique way to understand how cultural, political and economic phenomena register with people. The meme at figure 1 is one example that points to the ambivalence people express regarding the past and future as well as their position within global markets. Landlocked in the heart of the African continent, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been continuously striving to breach its borders and connect to the wider global community. Yet as infrastructural transformations offer promises of connectivity, anxieties surface around the vulnerability that comes with that connection.

Coltan is a rare metal prehistorically deposited in the DRC’s veins that now pumps through cell phones and car batteries, but with such a blessing comes the curse of hungry foreign investors. Like the rest of the world, mobile phone technology is becoming integral to the lived reality of the Congolese people. Though still a nascent market, in 2020 there were an estimated 35.13 million mobile connections, equivalent to 40% of the DRC’s total population[[2]](#footnote-2). The situation in the DRC presents a two-way flow, where the inner viscera of mobile technologies flow out of the country while the final realization of its commodity form flows back in. This dual movement is sometimes aligned, other times in opposition, or both simultaneously. One stark expression of this phenomenon is seen in the dual movement of biological and memetic virality.

For people whose lives are doubly affected by this extraction and consumption, one possible avenue of escape is the content they consume and share: information, images, memes; a new visual language engendered and enabled through the very technology rearranging the earth beneath their feet. It is in this act that Congolese citizens can recapture a piece of these signs and codes for their own narratives and politics.

As older forms of expression and communication employ new technologies, they impose their own pre-digital memetic force. Viral content interacts with other modes of communication, such as rumour, which has been used to convey opinions about biological viral outbreaks like Ebola and now Covid-19. The parallel viralities of pathogens and (mis)information is lost on few. As China takes the spotlight in discussions about 5G cellular technology, metonymies metastasize into memetic narratives and alternate realities. With this technological potential come new anxieties mirroring the movement of discovery and extraction, which are especially apparent in countries that are brought into global mining networks.

I draw here on ethnographic research conducted in the capital city of Kinshasa in collaboration with Ribio Nzeza, a professor of Communication at the University of Kinshasa. Our findings point to how people circulating texts, images, and memes can disturb structural power. But the open channels, the overflow of signs, the collapse of context—these can also be a contagious force driving breakdown of the social order.[[3]](#footnote-3)

One kind of imagery or visual code impregnated with a force unique to DRC are its memes. Here, we move from virality to virility, an overabundance of life. There’s a focus on the corporeality of African bodies, both in their mythological locality, and their eternal affirmations as spiritual cosmologies. These memes, carried anonymously by internet infrastructures, are another connection between the individual and the collective, and between the DRC and the world.

Afbeelding met tekst, persoon, krant, schermafbeelding

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 2 caption translation: When you’re left with only 50f to send 50 texts and Airtel asks you if you want to make a donation of 50f to the government for the fight against covid-19. The specific “when you’re…” opening text and the two-panel image follow familiar meme structures. Meanwhile, one needs to think twice before deciding if this is a meme, an ad or a PSA. Meme courtesy of Socier officiel (Instagram)

## Digital Divide and Control

The West Africa Cable System (WACS) is a submarine fibre-optic cable that provides bandwidth to much of Africa. Implemented in 2012, the DRC was only connected to WACS about a year after this date, with the help of Chinese foreign investment due to a lack of in-country funding. Currently, approximately 70% of the African continent’s IT spine has been built by Huawei, a Chinese telecom giant. Information shared between African people must ride Chinese information highways via detours through European data centres, which means that streaming video comes with a slight lag. Such gaps in time undergo compound expansion as more people have become dependent on stable internet connections due to the pandemic. Consequently, Huawei has offered to strengthen the DRC’s national backbone network with 5G technology.[[4]](#footnote-4)

News of China’s investments should not suggest that the DRC has reached an equitable distribution of connectivity. This country, roughly two thirds the size of western Europe, is home to an estimated population of 89 million people, many of whom survive on $2 USD a day. The digital divide is still massive in this vast land and it is difficult to discern how many people are actually online, as quantitative research regarding online activity in the DRC is scant. This said, people are drawn to online culture like everyone else, chronicling their lives through digital images. They are becoming meme producers — jokes, statements, and outrages get the infinitely shareable translation to become collective expressions. Images are replicable and modifiable, sacred and desecrated — and always with the potential to become a weapon turned against the self qua creator, sharer, witness. For this reason, posters of most memes circulating in, and around, the DRC remain anonymous. This is true both within the country’s borders and among members of its diaspora.

The Congolese State is not unaware of the destabilizing potential of digital democracy: this decade has been marked by periods of civil protest, and the people know all-too-well that internet blackouts are one of the government's first lines of attack against “unruly” masses. And of course, more traditional censorship is also part of its arsenal. So long as the internet is running, the anonymity provided by social media platforms will be both where and how you critique power and organize political movements.

Viral content in the DRC interacts with a longer history of orality and rumour, as well as political cartoons. During the colonial era when the DRC was oppressed by Belgium, cartoons and popular paintings were communicative genres instrumental in the struggle for independence,[[5]](#footnote-5) and in postcolonial settings they are mediums that covertly and sometimes explicitly mock and challenge gross abuses of power.[[6]](#footnote-6) Like rumours, memes assume new meaning as they circulate. Building on Achille Mbembe’s provocation that “rumour is the poor-man’s bomb”,[[7]](#footnote-7) Frances Nyamnjoh draws parallels between rumour and cartoons in the context of neighbouring Cameroon, foreshadowing what would later form part of contemporary discussions about alternative sources of truth. He writes, “Both political rumour and cartooning, it could be argued, are ways of cushioning the hardness of the crushing and stifling official discourse that monopolised the public sphere, often claiming to be the sole bearer of truth.”[[8]](#footnote-8) With the advent of new technology and the diminishing importance of print newspapers in the DRC, memes — specifically image macros (that is, images captioned with text, blending magazine graphic art, print ads and single-panel comics) — are considered 2.0 versions of cartoons. Memes are visual forms shaped by people’s concrete experiences, even as they are expressed with the raw visual material circulating in abstract and proprietary spaces. Moreover, in becoming a generative medium through which to discuss politics, they reshape lives and in turn form a continuous productive-consumptive loop.

## The Appeal of Memes

As a mechanism of critique, subversive memes hold fascination both in their content as well as for the suspenseful thrill of following the reaction to — or of evading consequences for — a given meme. Figure 3, for instance, is a meme that points to the government’s involvement with extractive capital. The head of Kabila Kamambe, the president of the DRC from 2001 to 2019, is photoshopped onto the body of a woman and ‘quoted’ as saying: “I am Kabila Kamambe, a mediocre prostitute sent from Rwanda.” The rubber boots are suggestive of the country’s eastern region where many of the mines are located. Here we have a combination of corrupt politicians, resource extraction, and the figurative "prostitute" who, in this context, uses their body to monetarily gain from a presumably wealthier and more powerful entity. This sort of print cartoon would land a cartoonist in jail, but as it was anonymously created and circulated online, it could not lead the authorities to hold any individual accountable. Still, simply viewing it or having it on a phone can give one a thrill of being a transgressive dissident.

Afbeelding met kleding, persoon, poseren, wapenrusting

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 3 caption translation: “I am Kabila Kamambe, a mediocre prostitute sent from Rwanda.”

Although some may argue that this symbolic act of transgression only deflates the pressure toward material action, a more likely assumption is that the circulation of political memes complicates the sources, avenues, targets and consequences of political criticism. This is largely since memes can be light-hearted as well as grave, coming at us as a fast-flow of images, perhaps even dulling us to these non-sequitur effects. From serious critiques of state or corporate politics, to ludic takes on social norms, it all blends into a comfy background rhythm of signs and expressions.

Take the highly meme’d pose (Figures 4 and 5) in which a woman carries an adult male using the familiar back sling normally used for babies. The grown man sucks his thumb or grins like a proud brat — the humorous intention apparent to all. However, such a meme also depends on the viewer being “in the know” regarding the context of the sling, of Congolese marital relations, of the infantility of men within domestic materiality, etc.Knowing this, the consumptive rewards are that much more “worth it.” The question again is: Will such mocking images result into true societal self-criticism? Or by making light of these issues, will they temper any call to change?

Afbeelding met binnen, persoon, muur

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijvingAfbeelding met tekst, persoon

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figures 4 & 5: Two examples of a popular meme depicting a man in a traditional sling normally used to carry babies.

This ambiguity brought on by political memes renders it difficult to locate a single source of unchallenged power. Rather, we have a carnivalesque commentary on the arbitrariness of authority. Whether it is the outright mocking of politicians (as in Figure 3), or playfully remixing familiar scenes of male-female/parent-child roles (Figures 4 and 5), the primary aim of these images is to make people laugh. Yet, there remains the danger of the two-way nature of meme production and consumption: one laughs at power, only for that laughter to become redirected at one’s own lack of power. We become both subjects of agency and objects of ridicule.

In this way, these memes echo what scholars have said of the role of print cartoons: “Laughter frequently adopts a self-reflexive mode through which those subject to power mock their own powerlessness and lack of agency in the face of a system that they perceive as immutable”.[[9]](#footnote-9) The self-reflexive laughter, always teetering at the edge of irony, is therefore a coping mechanism.

Afbeelding met tekst, auto, schermafbeelding

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 6 caption translation from left to right: “Politicians, wives of politicians, sons of politicians, voters.” The instant you get the joke about the corruption of politicians, you’re immediately forced to confront your own poverty and powerlessness. Thisenforces the coping mechanism of self-reflexive laughter at your sorry lot and its causes (namely the greedy ruling classes).

Sometimes, universality is eschewed for more granular in-group identification. The virality of certain memes or videos depend on their capacity to communicate a select group’s situations and ideas, which is often accomplished at the expense of some “other” (such othered figures will haunt this paper further down). And in the shared feeling of identity, community, and nationality, these memes create an imaginary universal set of shared interests.[[10]](#footnote-10) The meme in Figure 6 was particularly popular among Congolese Facebook groups, but more so for those now living in Europe than within the DRC’s borders. The three-panel image macro describes the state of surveillance in three different contexts. The U.S-China rivalry is here flattened to similar states using high-tech CCTV cameras. Both are contrasted to the final panel: a neighbourhood in Kinshasa. The meme’s appeal resides in how it emits self-essentialized caricatures of Congolese culture: perhaps low-tech, but more personal.

Afbeelding met tekst, buiten, krant

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 6 caption translation: “Surveillance cameras, America, China, Lingwala” (a neighbourhood in Kinshasa). Again, the joke is based on the material inequalities between the richer countries and poorer Africa, while at the same time reminding/rewarding “in-the-know” viewers through a sense of personal community-interest lacking in the techno-surveillance states of “advanced” countries*.*

## Made in China

International media often criticizes China’s manoeuvring as a neo-colonial power in Africa (though some would say that China is merely following the logic of global capitalism). In many African countries, little to no local industry exists, and affordable Chinese goods are the only choice. Pejorative terms like “Fong Kong'' in Southern Africa and “Chinoiserie” in Francophone Africa express people’s disappointment with the quality of the products that saturate their lives. A common joke in the DRC: A Chinese man marries a Congolese woman and has a baby. The baby dies and everyone cries except the Congolese woman’s father, who says: “Nothing Chinese-made lasts very long.”

In memes too, Chinese presence on the African continent is made visible. One finds the expected light-hearted provocations about cultural stereotypes, such as Figure 13. This meme depicts a Chinese-owned shop in the DRC featuring a mannequin that mimics stereotypical Congolese silhouettes, with the text pointing to China’s propensity to make knockoffs of anything. These images work their way into everyday conversations, sometimes causing debate.

Afbeelding met tekst

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 13 caption translation: (left) “Chinese don’t miss anything! They made a Congolese mannequin.”

The circulation of people, products and memes has given rise to a multiplication of conspiracy theories across the African continent. Figure 14 presents us with a photoshopped image of a Chinese man grabbing African women’s breasts. Is this legitimate or fake news, propaganda or just a troll? What backlash can it cause if interpreted as legitimate?

Afbeelding met tekst, buiten, persoon, strand

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 14 caption translation: “Here is what this poor Chinese man is doing in the quarries with miners.”

## A Me(r)maid’s Tale

Creative genres incorporating text and image (popular art, print ads and print cartoons) draw from oral histories, folkloric tales, and rumours of their cultures. These archives of popular history are now being worked into memes. For instance, the mystical siren *Mami Wata* is a recurring folkloric motif across Africa, appearing in Congolese paintings. Between the 1950s and 1970s these paintings portrayed her donning a wrist watch, an imprint of colonial power. The appearance of this aspirational symbol came at a time when people were experiencing an inflow of new consumer commodities (Figures 9,10,11), themselves symbols of the times changing. Clock-time is also symbolic of the rigid organization of daily life so necessary to capitalist modes of production.

Afbeelding met tekst, geschilderd

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijvingAfbeelding met tekst, oud, fotolijstje, vintage

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijvingAfbeelding met tekst, oud, steen

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figures 7, 8, and 9: Mami Wata wearing a wrist watch.

Since the colonial period, people have told of encounters with Mami Wata, who is depicted as a siren, an irresistible temptress. In exchange for loyalty or a sacrifice, she offers men material wealth and success. Wealthy men are sometimes perceived as having made pacts with Mami Wata, especially if people cannot directly infer their line of work or the source of their financial success. One commonly hears, “azalaka na mwasi ya Mami Wata, mbongo naye eza mystique” (he has a Mami Wata, his money is mystical). These perceived suspicious and dubious sources of wealth are considered immoral because they are linked to occult forces that have been harnessed in their acquisition. Mami Wata is deeply connected to material excess, luring hapless suitors with the trappings of the modern capitalist world. In this way, her serpentine nature connects with the Edenic serpent of the Bible, beguiling humans with sweet and shiny things into the modern world of work, pain, and suffering. Now, this sea serpentess swims alongside information and rumours through digital channels. Men are warned about online romantic liaisons with digital sirens. With new channels come new monsters and anxieties.

One story of Mami Wata surfaced in 2012 when Chinese engineers were installing underwater internet cables in the Congo River.[[11]](#footnote-11) Complications bred rumours of something fishy. Then, they caught Her. A video of captured Mami Wata went viral and eventually aired on national television. How could Mami Wata, so ancient and mysterious, be captured by the Chinese? Chinese people had to become the exotic “other”, powerful enough to catch this supernatural creature that was disturbing the connection between Congo’s cables and a broader network.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The ways Mami Wata and digital culture circulate demonstrate how the internet is a vehicle for encounters with otherness. Further, both expressions are inter-participatory: their meanings coexist in constant evolution. Parallels can also be made between the virality of memes and Mami Wata’s memetic force, in that they are mutable and shapeshifting, both inspiring myths that coalesce into rumours and back again. The cultural feedback loop in which Mami Wata swims has her constantly chasing her own fin.

As circulation accelerates — of people, commodities, images, ideas — proximities will breed new anxieties as well as new potentialities. The ambiguity between anxiety and triviality immanent to internet technology infects our relationships, especially to the “other”. Mobile and internet technology only expands the unprotected spaces where others can infect you. In the DRC, mobile-phone technology has provoked concerns about new social forms of intimacy, which then slip into suspicions about spiritual foul play. Since with a mobile one is always reachable, one is always vulnerable to the social “other”.

One circulating rumour across Africa and Asia involved a tale of people killed after answering an unknown telephone number[[13]](#footnote-13)— like getting a computer virus when you download a file. This rumour reveals the anxieties associated with the overlapping dynamics of social connectivity, globalisation, and local ontologies of the supernatural. Further, there are some underlying assumptions here to do with local forms of African witchcraft. Writing in the context of South Africa, Jean and John Comaroff suggest that witchcraft in Africa can be thought of as, “etiological principles which translate structural contradictions, experiential anomalies, and aporiahs [sic]— force fields of greater complexity than is normally implied by ‘‘class struggle’’—into the argot of human agency, of interpersonal kinship, of morality and passion.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The form that witchcraft often takes in the DRC and other African countries relates to intimacy and trust.[[15]](#footnote-15) In other words, the people within one's social networks have the potential of doing you the most harm. Witches can act unconsciously, unaware that they are inflicting harm on others. These supernatural forces now circulate in the digital realm, as even those closest to you can be conduits sharing viruses (biological or computational) or exposing you to anxiety-inducing viral content.

Local ontologies of enchantment, magic, and the sacred strengthen the idea that images themselves are virulent, infecting people’s minds on a literal level. For instance, it is not uncommon for a person to say: “Do not infect my phone with that video of yours. I do not want to be contaminated by those images.” With regards to the Mami Wata viral video, people were reluctant to save it on their phones, fearing its mystical quality could infect the viewer through its communication. With memes, the passage from information to persuasion to manipulation is optimized, as depicted in Figure 10 in which a young man is washing his brain, trying to make it clean again.

Afbeelding met persoon, buiten

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 10 caption translation: “Tag a friend who needs to have his brain washed” Though the term brainwashing directly translates in French as “lavage de cerveau”, this meme also refers to having a dirty mind. Meme courtesy of Starjirexmedia (Instagram)

## Self-Mockery as Defence

Supernatural content in memes can also be light-hearted, and not perceived as sinister. Consider the rooster in Figure 11, standing at attention among a roll call of uniformed soldiers. The French caption reads, “When you are a witch and forget to transform yourself back in the morning.” Like many great memes, the humour operates at several different levels: the common meme “TMW” setup, the witch’s forgetfulness, the in-feeling of getting the mystical significance, a poke at militarism, and the gesture of Congolese self-mockery in which the idea of a witch’s presence is an uncanny, yet plausible one.

Afbeelding met tekst, persoon, militair uniform, poseren

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 11 caption translation: “When you’re a witch and you forget to transform yourself in the morning.” This follows the familiar “that moment when…” (TMW) structure very common in memes.

“Sorcier officiel,” or ‘Witch official,’ is a profile on Instagram devoted to francophone African memes (Fig 12). The account handle is an ironic nod to African witchcraft, but also to the bureaucratic humour of writing from a witch’s “official” account (as if it is run by witch interns). Sorcier officiel’s popularity signals the bewitching quality of being a meme creator, charged with the task of sending out images to infect our minds.

Afbeelding met tekst, persoon, krant, schermafbeelding

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 12 caption translation: “The moment when your phone is charging and you start to think about your future.” Again, there is that “TMW” structure. Meme courtesy of Socier officiel (Instagram)

## Enchanted Horizons

As the reality of a biological virus dominates our material lives, its media dominates our airwaves and bandwidth. The next decade’s struggle over internet politics will usher in its own ideological battles, and mapping the pressure points of geopolitical anxieties can reveal the moving intersections between biological and technological virality. The digital image of Mami Wata, that captured mythical siren — horrid and scared in a bright white room, surrounded by prodding engineers — surfaced during a moment when connectivity was on the horizon. Congolese people have long understood the potency of images, and their power to spread, infect and manipulate. Dichotomies between the state and “the people”, as well as China and the “rest” are not clearly discernible, and alliances between different actors and entities create new complexities in terms of both cooperation and emergent antagonisms.

As memes continue to circulate around the world, people in the global north, are (re)discovering the enchantment of images, a force that had long been ascribed to irrational worldviews of the “other”. Now memes delight and perhaps even unite us as they circulate on our slick and well-branded devices. And in the political realm they have proven to translate their virality into tools of power struggles. However, as our world becomes more connected and infected, we should say: it is not so much a short-circuiting by the “other”, but a crashing of a horizon between worlds.

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