

COVID-19 and the Ugandan Presidential Election: Contesting Lockdown Authority in Popular Songs

David G. Pier  and Micheal Mutagubya

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic struck when Uganda was in the middle of an acrimonious campaign season, in which longstanding president Yoweri Museveni was being challenged by Bobi Wine, a reggae singer turned politician. When Museveni imposed a strict lockdown, musicians sympathetic to Wine responded with songs about COVID-19 that challenged the government's short-term, biopolitical demarcation of the national emergency. Pier and Mutagubya interpret a selection of Ugandan COVID-19 pop songs from 2020, considering in musical-historical perspective their various strategies for re-narrating the health crisis.

Résumé : La pandémie de COVID-19 a frappé alors que l'Ouganda était au milieu d'une saison de campagne acrimonieuse, au cours de laquelle le président de longue date Yoweri Museveni était défié par Bobi Wine, un chanteur de reggae devenu politicien. Lorsque Museveni a imposé un confinement strict, entravant l'opposition, les musiciens sympathisants de Wine ont répondu avec des chansons sur la COVID-19 qui remettaient en question la démarcation biopolitique à court terme de l'urgence nationale par le gouvernement. Pier et Mutagubya interprètent une sélection de chansons pop ougandaises COVID-19 de 2020 et considèrent au travers de l'histoire de la musique leurs diverses stratégies pour une nouvelle narration de la crise sanitaire.

Resumo : A pandemia de COVID-19 eclodiu quando o Uganda se encontrava num período de campanha eleitoral aguerrida, no qual o presidente Yoweri Museveni, há muito no poder, foi desafiado por Bobi Wine, um cantor de *reggae* que se tornou

African Studies Review, Volume 66, Number 1 (March 2023), pp. 149–175

David G. Pier is an Associate Professor of African, African American, and Diaspora Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Email: dpier@email.unc.edu.

Micheal Mutagubya, DP, is an African traditional and popular music scholar and a politician. Email: michaelmutagubya@gmail.com

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association.

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.143

político. Quando Museveni impôs medidas rígidas de confinamento, assim enfraquecendo a oposição, os músicos simpatizantes de Wine reagiram com canções acerca da COVID-19 que punham em causa a abordagem biopolítica e de curto prazo que o governo adotara para a situação de emergência nacional. Pier e Mutagubya selecionam um conjunto de canções *pop* ugandesas de 2020 sobre a COVID-19 e analisam, numa perspectiva histórico-musical, as suas várias estratégias para propor narrativas alternativas da crise sanitária.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; Uganda; Yoweri Museveni; Bobi Wine; music; digital media; afrobeats; kadongo kamu

(Received 1 February 2022 – Revised 13 September 2022 – Accepted 30 September 2022)

The announcement by the World Health Organization (WHO) of a COVID-19 pandemic on March 11, 2020, coincided with Uganda's bitter presidential election season. Longtime president Yoweri Museveni was defending his seat against a number of challengers, most threateningly Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, better known as Bobi Wine, a young reggae star-turned-politician. Since winning a parliamentary seat in 2017, Wine had been building a movement against Museveni based on youth mobilization and street demonstrations, following in the footsteps of Kizza Besigye, who had run street-protest-based campaigns against Museveni in the four previous elections (Wilkins, Vokes, & Khisa 2021). To Besigye's strategy, Wine added celebrity charisma, media savvy, and politically charged songs, performed by himself and allied pop artists. He and his supporters wore bright red and raised their fists in solidarity, recalling Julius Kalema's EFF party in South Africa and diverse leftist revolutionary movements of the past. These spectacles, combined with Wine's background as a musician, drew considerable international interest and support.

Museveni's government had begun its attacks on Wine and his allies well before the election year. From 2017, concerts Wine staged at his lakefront venue had been regularly shut down for alleged safety violations, and musicians known to be aligned with Wine were similarly harassed (Friesinger 2021). On August 13, 2018, police fired upon Wine's car while he was touring the northern region of Arua with political allies, killing his driver. Wine and his comrades (the mostly female "Arua 33") were subsequently imprisoned and tortured by guards. This political violence leading up to the 2021 elections had long been anticipated by the Ugandan public. Since Museveni's last victory in 2016, Ugandans had begun speculating grimly about the next election, the force the President would likely use to secure his seat, and the protests and violence that might be displayed against him. By 2020, a powder-keg atmosphere prevailed in Uganda, particularly in Kampala (Epstein 2020). It was at the peak of this tension that the global COVID-19 pandemic broke out and Museveni's government implemented a strict lockdown.

On March 18, 2020, the government suspended public gatherings, including political rallies, concerts, and worship services, and Ugandans returning from abroad were quarantined. Within the next week, public transport was shut down and schools were closed, along with some outdoor markets. The *Daily Monitor* newspaper ran a photo spread of the eerily empty taxi park, long lines of people walking to work, and police using their sticks against market vendors. These images resonated with memories of earlier street protests and government crackdowns, particularly Besigye's "Walk to Work" protests of 2011 (Mutumba 2022). Over the following months, a nighttime curfew was imposed.

Lockdown was materially hard on many Ugandans, who found it difficult or impossible to get to their jobs as well as to do the kind of informal, network-based barter and gifting of goods and services upon which many ordinarily rely. Families became food-insecure, as prices increased. Hospitals were critically understaffed, and patients in need of hospital treatment stayed at home (Misk 2021). Restrictions that were promised to be of only temporary duration were repeatedly extended, or briefly relaxed only to be reimposed. Uganda's closure of schools achieved international notoriety for being the world's longest, lasting almost two years, from March 2020 to January 2022. Schoolgirls, now stuck at home, especially suffered, as many were obliged to take up domestic labor roles and lost the sheltering against sexual advances schools had provided, with a resultant spike in teenage pregnancies (*Independent* 2021).

Some international epidemiologists expressed approval of Museveni's prompt and vigorous lockdown policies, highlighting Uganda as a "role model" for other African countries (Sarki 2020). Other foreign observers, however, wondered whether this lockdown was disproportionate, given the relatively low case counts in the country and the high costs of lockdown to household economies, hospital staffing, and other critical infrastructure. Critics noted especially the excessive use of police violence in enforcing lockdown rules. One study showed that the government's police actions were focused on districts that had historically shown little support for Museveni (Grasse et al. 2020). In November, Human Rights Watch accused Ugandan authorities of "weaponizing COVID 19 for repression," highlighting the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition on Wine and other opposition candidates, as well as journalists and the general public (Human Rights Watch 2020). Museveni, for his part, was unapologetic about his government's strongarm COVID-19 politics, refashioning his campaign around themes of "scientific" rationality, strength, and stamping out the pathogenic Other. "Here in Africa we are not fighting against coronavirus. We are fighting primarily against social indiscipline of our people," he posted on his Facebook page. He declared a "scientific campaign roadmap" to which his own party would be adhering during the pandemic, and which his opponents would also be obliged to respect. The police shut down Wine's campaign events for COVID-19 safety reasons while Museveni carried on with his own campaign tours, claiming that his party and its supporters were dispositionally

more civil and respectful of pandemic rules. In a contest between a 37-year-old and a 76-year-old that was already destined to be about the youth-elders divide, Museveni took the pandemic as an opportunity to revive old fears about wayward, dangerous youth.

In the early months of the lockdown, Ugandan recording artists released a spate of COVID-themed songs, many of which contained explicit or implicit critiques of the lockdown and the Museveni government. In different pop genres, singers depicted the disease and the depredations of lockdown as symptoms of chronic malaise in the Ugandan body politic under Museveni's rule. These songs seemed to be composed partly to counter the government's own musical COVID-19 outreach, which was released in March in the form of an all-star production, "Corona Distance," led by Bebe Cool, a known ally of the government and rival of Bobi Wine. Musicians opposing Museveni, beginning with Wine himself, responded with their own songs that variously coopted the government's emergency authority, made mockery of its lockdown efforts, or targeted these efforts for critical debate. Overall, artists attempted to disrupt and seize control over the government's self-validating media staging of the emergency—its "media event" (Dayan & Katz 1992). This effort to disrupt the government's official narrative was in keeping with the earlier campaign strategies of Wine, and before him, Besigye. As Sam Wilkins, Richard Vokes, and Moses Khisa have argued (2021), Besigye had focused his organizational energies on seizing the media narrative, knowing that, given the ruling party's thorough control over Ugandan politics at every level of organization, he stood little chance of winning elections using more conventional processes of coalition building.

For Museveni, the pandemic was an opportunity to perform an authoritative emergency role well established in international governance. For singers opposed to Museveni and sympathetic to Wine, the crisis was conversely an opportunity to call Museveni's stance as epidemiologist-in-chief into question. Toward this end, they adopted several rhetorical approaches. One song, to be discussed below, attempted to coopt the government's role of informing and reassuring the public, promoting Wine, rather than Museveni, for the position of emergency leader and healer of the nation's ills. Other songs challenged the government's definition of the emergency, depicting the pandemic not as a stand-alone event, but rather as one affliction among many others Uganda had previously suffered under Museveni's rule. Finally, some COVID-19 songs took a mocking, defiant tone, as if to say that this was the only remaining mode of political dissent, in a system where conventional modes of challenging rulers (especially elections) had become futile.

In this article, we interpret a selection of Ugandan COVID-19 pop songs, which we have transcribed and translated from their original Luganda language. Our interest is in what these songs seem to have been saying politically in the context of the election/lockdown, and also in their more philosophical meditations on illness and healing in the Ugandan body politic. Museveni, in proclaiming his party to be on the side of "science" and his opponents to be on the side of "indiscipline," was taking up a position

of “biopolitical” authority, to invoke Michel Foucault’s concept (2010), which has been developed in different directions by Giorgio Agamben and others. In resisting Museveni, musicians attempted in one way or another to undermine the president’s claim that, in a pandemic crisis, immediate threats to the life and health of the population had to be prioritized, and that Museveni, as the experienced, elder, authoritarian military leader—who had in the past received the international community’s support for his economic and biomedical policies—was the only person capable of doing this. We will observe how artists variously tried to coopt standard emergency biopolitics, reject them, or trouble them with reminders of life in temporalities other than that of technocratic urgency.

Even as these songs were political volleys against the regime, they may also be read as philosophical musings on how the Ugandan social fabric had been disrupted by the pandemic, and how it might be remade. Some songs addressed these problems in elegant, allusive poetry, others more straightforwardly, and still others with deliberate crudeness. Most, however, had something to say about how the current crisis was affecting ordinary human relationships, and what the larger moral stakes of this shock to the system might be. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek has emphasized that this pandemic is above all a moment of profound disruption of our basic social conventions at the embodied, habitual level. We all are having to contend with what wearing a mask means as an intrapersonal gesture, what it means to have an online meeting versus an in-person one, and whether we are comfortable with government-mandated vaccinations, electronic contract tracing, and so on. COVID-19 is not simply transitioning us from “a communal life to a distanced one,” as libertarian critics of mandatory masking and social distancing have insisted. Rather, we are undergoing “a more complex shift from one constellation of closeness and distancing to another” (Žižek 2020:59). In this moment of unsettledness—Žižek likens it to the confused interval between dreams—there is potential for collective experimentation and reinvention, toward some new, as yet unformed, social ontology. Music, we would suggest, is a particularly important vehicle for such experimental probings of the social, given its coordinating involvements of bodily movements, emotions, and poetry. The philosopher Joel Krueger has proposed that music distinctively serves as a kind of “scaffolding” for cognitions of our social worlds (Krueger 2019). Thus, we are interested in these songs not just for what they say about the election and Museveni’s biopolitical pretensions, but also for their more philosophical implications.

Our research on this music has been accomplished collaboratively, at a distance. One of us, who is Ugandan, collected and translated the songs while experiencing lockdown firsthand from his home in Kampala. He monitored radio and television broadcasts and internet circulations and discussed songs with friends, family, and neighbors. The other author contributed from his home in the US, helping to shape the on-the-ground research, conducting additional online research, and composing the final written arguments based on our regular conversations. While we are both trained in ethnomusicology

and have conducted ethnomusicological research in Uganda in the past, this research has been ethnographic only to a limited degree, being based mainly on our own culturally informed readings of songs and music videos.

A number of international studies of COVID-19 music have already been published (e.g., Aikins 2020; Giordano et al. 2020; Makwa 2020; Mulemi 2021; Padmanabha & Kumar 2020; Parivudhiphongs 2020; Thompson et al. 2020; Thampi et al. 2020; van der Merwe et al. 2021). Many of these consider the potential therapeutic and informational uses of music within projects of pandemic intervention. Our own work contrastingly focuses on the political uses of music in a situation in which biomedical intervention itself is weaponized by one side to subdue the other. There are many (ethno)musicological studies of music and politics in Africa, in the specific context of elections (e.g., Gueye 2013; Lipenga 2021; Perullo 2005) and more broadly (e.g., Allen 2004; Askew 2002; Ranger 1975). This present study is more specifically situated in what might be called the (ethno)musicology of internet-era media events.

The term “media event” was first used to theorize thoroughly scripted, televised events such as the moon landing or President Nixon’s visit to China, whose purpose was to bring a mass viewing public together and restore its faith in government (Dayan & Katz 1992). Media scholars, including those who first coined the term, now concur that meticulous stage-managing of media events by the government for propagandistic purposes is no longer possible (Hepp & Couldry 2010). The multiplication of media streams has ensured that every major event is narrated in myriad, often conflicting ways. Media scholars approach today’s media events as fields of contestation, with diverse factions fighting to give them shapes and meanings. There have been an increasing number of studies that focus on how music, digitally circulated music in particular, is involved in the contestation of international-scale media events. Digitally circulated popular music played an important role in generating and (mis)representing the Arab Uprisings of 2011 (McDonald 2019; Tudoroiu 2014), the Occupy movement of that same year (Bianchi 2018), and the Black Lives Matter movement (Orejuela & Shonekan 2018). The use of music to shape an event in the public imagination is not a new phenomenon; historians have explored, for example, the role of music in etching particular images of the French Revolution in European consciousness—from “La Marseillaise” to the symphonies of Beethoven (Boyd 1992). Digital production technologies and the internet offer, however, vastly accelerated and geographically expanded possibilities for musical event-response and event-construction, so that the musical, crowd-mediatized representation of an event may be simultaneous with, or even outpace, the event’s unfolding in other dimensions. Globally, the rapidity of pop music responses to COVID-19 was remarkable; by the end of July 2020, there were over 8000 COVID-themed songs in online commercial circulation, according to a user-maintained playlist on the streaming site Spotify (McDonald 2020).

In the Ugandan context, the proliferation of COVID-19 songs critical of the government was especially noteworthy, given Museveni’s censorship and

intimidation of the media (Cohen & MacIntyre 2020; da Silva 2020; Walulya & Nassanga 2020). In recent years, the Ugandan government has made its disapproval of the internet known and legislated against its casual usage, notably with its Social Media Tax of 2018. Social media have, however, proven impossible to tamp down entirely. Ugandan users have continued to communicate and organize online, finding ways around government-imposed obstacles and surveillance. We suggest that, apart from their critical content, Ugandan COVID-19 songs were significant as objects that could be internet-circulated, affirming, in the process, the potency of the medium itself. Our present study thus relates to other recent inquiries into internet mediatization and politics in Africa (e.g., Nyabola 2018; Shipley 2013). It is noteworthy that the song, with conventional verse/chorus structure, persists as a favored format for politically symbolic online productions and transactions, even in an age of memes, TikTok videos, and other concise, accessible, spreadable modes of communication. Hit songs continue to have outsized effects in the crowd-shaping of media events, and this implies that musicologists will continue to be able to make distinctive contributions to the study of contemporary mediatized politics. Musicologists can bring a deeper understanding of the music-historical context of particular songs—for example, by highlighting how certain songs stylistically index certain established genres, and should be interpreted with the rhetorical conventions of those genres in mind.

In the next section, before delving into our song interpretations, we expand further upon grand theories of “biopolitics,” as well as specific histories of disease control in Africa, which have informed our readings of the Ugandan political climate during the pandemic. We do not subscribe to a theory of biopolitics that conceives of it in simple relations of oppression and resistance. While the musicians singing against the Museveni government may be compelled to counter its biopolitical pretensions, they are not disinvested from biopolitics *per se*; the long history of biopolitics in Uganda has to some degree been one of African embrace and syncretism, not just one of European imperial imposition. We are thus drawn more to Foucault’s theory of biopolitics, with its allowance for historical contingency, than we are to Agamben’s, with its transhistorical ascription of a distinctively repressive biopolitics to the western political tradition.

Theorizing Biopolitics in Ugandan Historical Context

The notion that a different valuation of human life, a “biopolitics,” developed in the West and became hegemonic as a mode of government, has been pursued by a number of prominent theorists—notably Hannah Arendt (1958), Michel Foucault (2010), and Giorgio Agamben (1995, 2005). Agamben’s fervent critique of biopolitics in declared states of emergency is one that many ethnographers have found especially attractive, as his ideas of government-by-“exception” and “bare life” resonate with the appalling scenes of government oppression and neglect they observe at their field sites.

Anthropologists Leslie Bank and Nellie Sharpley (2022), for example, have applied Agamben's theoretical framework in their study of the South African COVID lockdown as it played out in rural Eastern Cape province. Police and funeral directors, following government regulations, arrived at rural funerals wearing hazmat suits, spraying disinfectant, and wrapping the bodies of the deceased in plastic. Bank and Sharpley interpret this aggressive, culturally insensitive biomedical intervention as a kind of demonstrative consignment of vulnerable citizens to an exceptional state of "bare" (or "naked") life, by means of which the ANC government reasserted its power. This South African situation bears resemblance to what happened in Uganda in its COVID/election year, and we have been tempted likewise to apply Agamben's lens. Yet we have certain misgivings about his theory, insofar as it implies a fundamental matrix of sovereignty and resistance-to-sovereignty underlying all modern politics that is transhistorically inscribed in the western political tradition. Foucault's theory of modern biopolitics differs from Agamben's in that he perceives the historical emergence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of a governmentality categorically distinct from that of sovereignty—one that it is not reducible to the powerful establishing their command over the powerless (Lemke 2005). Foucault, more than Agamben, emphasizes the historical contingency of biopolitics, leaving the door open for complexities and reversals in how it might manifest at different conjunctures. Our concern with Agamben's theory is that it predisposes us to read situations in terms of exercises of brutal sovereign power, and heroic resistance to that power, and may accordingly desensitize us to the ways actors on the ground may be complexly invested in the system.

Foucault and Agamben concern themselves mainly with developments internal to Europe or the West. Other theorists and historians have focused more on how modern biopolitics emerged out of, and were intensified by, European engagements with the assumed non-Western Other, particularly in the imperial nineteenth century. Alex de Waal (2021) narrates how disease control and military action became ideologically merged in nineteenth-century Europe, in key events such as the stamping out of a cholera epidemic in Hamburg by military-style interventions from the more authoritarian city of Berlin. The "war on disease" narrative first tested in Europe would come to play a crucial role in Europe's imperial adventures in Africa and elsewhere. Colonial projects to eliminate diseases such as sleeping sickness, trypanosomiasis, and syphilis were prolific and spectacular, often involving the large-scale uprooting of Africans from their homes and the burning of vast acreages (Hoppe 1997; Vaughan 1991; Webel 2019). The colonial obsession with disease control and sanitation was echoed in institutions such as schools, clinics, and churches, where an ethic of biomedical hygiene was melded with Christian teachings of spiritual purification (Omolo-Okalebo 2011; Tuck 1997).

Having acknowledged the European ideological roots of modern biopolitics, it would be a mistake to see war-on-disease politics in colonial Africa as a one-way affair, with Africans either meekly complying with, or putting up

resistance to, European epidemiological imperatives. As Shane Doyle has emphasized, Ugandan chiefs under British colonial rule became protagonists of disease control projects, maneuvering within them to their own political advantage (2013:81–85). British colonials, adhering to the strategy of indirect rule, placed the reins of war-on-disease to a great degree in the hands of the African chiefs, who often eagerly took them up with their own local ascendancy in mind. After colonial rule ended, war-on-disease remained a discourse of power in Africa. President Idi Amin, for example, carried out a “war against dirt” not only to impress foreign investors, but also to justify police actions and intensify his supremacy over rival elites (Decker 2010). This history is pertinent to our present study of COVID-19 politics, in that it suggests that we interpret songs criticizing pandemic interventions not simply as expressions of resistance to a biopolitics, conceived of as “Western.” Rather, we should consider the ways artists such as Bobi Wine may be jockeying for position *within* an emergency biopolitics that has long been naturalized as part of Uganda’s own political fabric.

Well before the colonial arrival, the Great Lakes region of Africa had its own indigenous articulations of public health and politics, and colonial biopolitics, when they arrived, were melded with these. In southern Uganda, as in many other parts of Bantu-language speaking Africa, people used the term *ngoma* to refer to a crucial ritual complex, involving collective dancing, call-and-response singing, drumming, and instrument-playing, devoted to the healing of individuals, communities, and the entire body politic (Janzen 1992). In the kingdom of Buganda, fundamental social/political relationships of “kinship, clanship, and kingship” (Kafumbe 2018) were ritually enacted in communal songs and dances which were hierarchically structured, but also dialogical and open to improvisation. Buganda’s *kabaka* exercised command over this *ngoma* ecology, maintaining the most revered musical instruments and a guild of expert musicians at his palace, and distributing power to lower-level leaders in the form of significant drums to be “eaten.” The palace did not, however, wield complete monopoly control over the *ngoma* complex. As historians David Schoenbrun (1998) and Neil Kodesh (2010) have argued, the deep political history of this region is one defined by recurrent, evolving tensions between rulers, who presided over the moral system of kinship-clanship-kingship, and relatively independent healers, who cultivated followings outside of that system by mediating between congregations and powerful spirits, maintaining their own proprietary drums and repertoires of healing songs and dances. As the kingdoms developed, rulers endeavored to coopt the healers and their powers, bringing them inside the royal court, and enshrining the archetype of the healer-king in their foundational myths. Some remainder of public healing seems, however, always to have persisted beyond direct royal control.

In short, music/dance, public health, and politics are thoroughly interwoven in Uganda’s deep history, with the dance rituals of *ngoma* serving as occasions both for affirmation of the governmental order and for expressions of divergence from, and/or friction against, that order. These dynamics are

alive in ngoma practice even today. Rural amateur ngoma troupes, often led by women's associations, play an important role in actively mediating between visiting politicians, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and corporations, and local audiences. The leaders of these groups strategically reinterpret the initiatives their visitors ask them to sing about, in ways that underline their own authority in the community, and may introduce complications and even contradictions into the narratives they have been told to sing (Pier 2015). Local performers took considerable initiative in defining, for local audiences, the global emergency of HIV/AIDS, in ways that went beyond the topics prescribed by the government and international NGOs (Barz 2006).

Ugandan COVID-19 Songs: Overview of Genres and Rhetorical Conventions

We turn now to our interpretation and contextualization of a selection of Ugandan COVID-19 songs released in 2020. We have not attempted to comprehensively survey all the songs on the theme of the pandemic from this period, but rather have chosen examples that were especially impactful, or interesting for other reasons. Some of these songs were big radio and television hits; “Tumbiza Sound,” for example, was likely the biggest hit of the year. Others had considerably more limited circulation, confined mainly to the internet. We learned of Paya Paya Right and Junior K.’s “Corona” and Siraje Ssebuliba’s “Coronavirus Okitukoze” by way of friend networks on the social media service Whatsapp. As far as we know, these two songs did not receive much play from radio and television broadcasters, and their viewing statistics on the video streaming site YouTube are low. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they were unknown to Ugandans. The diversity of streams through which songs can now travel—myriad radio stations which compose their own playlists, burned CDs or thumb drives available for sale or swapping, multiple social media outlets, live performances—makes it difficult to accurately assess the audience size for specific songs.

Our discussion proceeds in three sections: “songs of information,” “songs of debate,” and “songs of derision.” These are categories we have devised for heuristic purposes, not ones which Ugandan artists and fans themselves use. It is not our intention to try to establish a typology into which all Ugandan songs can be neatly slotted. We do, however, believe that we are indexing common rhetorical modes in Ugandan music culture, which arise out of specific histories.

By “songs of information,” we mean songs in a globally prevalent mode of public-health messaging, which convey, in a straightforward, didactic tone, official information and advice about face masks, social distancing, and the like. Such songs typically carry the imprimatur of the state government or some other authoritative institution such as the WHO. Beyond their informational function, these songs help to legitimize the sponsoring government

or organization in the public eye. When governments commission songs of information, they seek not only to inform the public, but also to demonstrate that they are biopolitically capable and engaged. The only 2020 COVID-19 song endorsed by Museveni was a song of information, “Corona Distance,” performed by the singer Bebe Cool and a cast of other celebrity singers. There was, however, another, rival, song of information released at the same time by Bobi Wine, the challenger candidate. We argue that, although the lyrics of Wine’s song were for the most part non-confrontational, its near-simultaneous release with the government’s song, and its backing by a powerful international organization, UNESCO, made it a significant oppositional gesture, setting a precedent for future COVID-19 songs against the regime.

Songs we call “songs of debate” derive political meaning partly from their contrast with songs of information. They deliberately complicate matters the government would prefer to keep narrow and unequivocal. Against the government’s depictions of the citizenry as being ignorant and in need of correction (see Museveni’s statement about “social indiscipline,” above), songs of debate assert the public’s ability to rationally weigh alternatives and make up its own mind. The two songs we discuss in this section both engage in independent-spirited knowledge production about COVID-19, while highlighting and problematizing the institutional spaces in which official knowledge production takes place. The video for one song is shot in a school classroom, while the other is staged in a village gathering place. The classroom setting is especially significant, given the historical importance of school as a space of inculcation and discipline by church and state, and, more specifically, given recent public frustrations with Museveni’s Universal Primary Education (UPE) program.

Finally, “songs of derision” attack authority in a ruder, more defiant way. If Museveni accuses of his opponents of being dangerously juvenile, one way of expressing resistance is to mockingly embrace the stereotype. Songs of derision laugh in the face of government, instead of attempting to engage in rational debate. Against government health and safety injunctions, these songs may seem to advocate for unsafe behaviors. We believe, however, that their main intention is to highlight the futility of government outreach efforts when no viable, consensual, relationship is allowed to exist between government and the governed. Songs of derision call to mind Achille Mbembe’s theorization of carnivalesque behavior under African authoritarian regimes, as we will discuss further below (Mbembe 1992). When people feel they have been deprived of all means of rational self-government, they may resort to grotesque expressions to create friction against rule. Mbembe argues that this defiant stance can work for the party in power as well as the opposition. Notably in this regard, Wilkins, Vokes, and Khisa (2021) have argued that “defiance” has become a standard stance in Ugandan politics, with both the opposition and, incredibly, Museveni himself, presenting themselves as outsiders to a corrupt, sclerotic, system.

Rival Songs of Information

During the week of March 21, 2020, two COVID-19 informational songs were released: “Corona Virus Alert” by Bobi Wine, the leading candidate for president against Museveni; and “Corona Distance” by an assembly of artists fronted by Bebe Cool (real name Moses Ssali). Cool’s song was praised by the president, and likely commissioned behind the scenes by his party, though no such direct sponsorship was ever acknowledged. Wine’s song, which came out first, received support from UNESCO, which featured it in its *#don’tgoviral* hashtag campaign (UNESCO 2020). In terms of informational content, the two songs were similar, both calling for social distancing, hand-washing, and covering one’s cough. The video for Cool’s song included explanatory graphics reminiscent of those shown in preparation for takeoff on an airplane. Wine’s video featured only himself and his longtime collaborator Nubian Li recording in the studio. Neither song made reference to the electoral contest, with the exception of one phrase in Wine’s song, which could be interpreted as a minor jab at Museveni. Listing COVID-19 symptoms to watch out for, Wine sang “*Okwetyamura* is a symptom.” “*Okwetyamura*” is a Runyankore word for “sneezing” which sounded obscure, rustic, and ethnically specific to Luganda-speaking Ugandans when Museveni, who is Munyankole, used it in his COVID-19 speeches. Museveni is famous for inserting folksy phrases from his home region, in ways that endear him to his supporters and irritate his detractors.¹ Wine’s “*okwetyamura*” mildly poked fun at the president and reminded his listeners of his opponent’s non-Muganda ethnic background.

From a political perspective, more important than the lyrical content of these songs was their simultaneous release by two artists famous for their rivalry. The celebrity feud between Bobi Wine and Bebe Cool, simmering for a decade and a half, is legendary (Asasira 2012:163). Both singers emerged in the mid-1990s as pioneers of the Ugandan Jamaican dancehall-derived genre known variously as *afrobeat(s)*, *kidandali* (Luganda for “dancehall”), or *ragga*. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Uganda’s tabloid newspapers ran stories about an ongoing “beef” between Bobi Wine and singing star Jose Chameleone, which drew in Bebe Cool on Chameleone’s side. Much of this was strategic scandal-mongering about who hit whose car, who insulted whose girlfriend, and the like. In 2009, Wine was reported to have punched Cool at a concert after Cool made a demeaning comment. In 2014, Wine accused Bebe Cool of being a “chichi man”—Jamaican slang for homosexual—partaking of Uganda’s then especially feverish anti-homosexuality discourse, and drawing condemnations from abroad (*Campus Bee* 2014). The Wine/Cool rivalry became an important axis for class identification, particularly among adolescents (Kalungi 2016). Wine was celebrated by his fans as the artist who remembered his “ghetto” roots after he attended university and built a successful musical career. His songs, notably his breakout 2005 single “Ghetto,” depicted the plight of the urban poor and complained of a negligent government which he accused of being more interested in courting rich

investors than in caring for those who struggle (Pier 2021). Bebe Cool came to be seen by his critics, contrastingly, as the son of a rich government minister who had frittered away the advantages he was born with, singing catchy, commercial songs without showing real concern for struggling Ugandans. The split became politicized when, in the run-up to the 2016 election, singer Jose Chameleone announced himself as a staunch supporter of Museveni with his praise song “Tubonga Nawe” (“We Are with You”), drawing Bebe Cool and a number of other singers along with him, while Wine remained an unrepentant critic of the regime (Anena 2018).

Given this history, there was little chance that “Corona Virus Alert” and “Corona Distance” would be received as neutral pandemic-safety messaging. The songs were readily interpreted within the frame of the Wine/Cool celebrity rivalry, which itself was understood as a proxy for the anti-Museveni/pro-Museveni political division. We observed Ugandans expressing their political affiliations by playing, singing along with, and dancing to one song over the other, with Bobi Wine’s song receiving more popular support. The endorsement of Wine’s song by UNESCO may have elevated Wine’s status in the estimation of some Ugandan voters. Thanks to this support, Wine became a guest on international news shows from the BBC and NPR. This added to the positive coverage he had received when, after his 2018 imprisonment, he had traveled to the US for medical treatment. Wine sang his song mostly in English, in a laid-back reggae style that American and European audiences might find especially approachable. The video, set in the recording studio, focused, with few interruptions, on Wine as a relaxed, self-assured, yet non-intimidating personality—rather like a campaign commercial. Bebe Cool, who received no international attention, sang his own reggae-inflected song at a brisker tempo and mostly in Luganda, the most common language of Ugandan pop. His song seemed to be crafted mainly for a Ugandan audience, whereas Wine was reaching out to sympathetic foreigners as well as his Ugandan base.

These two earliest Ugandan COVID-19 songs were, in their lyrics and video imagery, non-confrontational—with the possible exception of Wine’s “okwetyamura” joke. They stuck closely to the standard song-of-information script. The contextual factors just discussed, however, made this song exchange much more politically significant than it would otherwise have been. It opened up a new, popular-music front in the electoral war, with other artists rallying to Wine’s side, composing and performing new, more assertive, COVID-19 songs.

Songs of Debate

Here, we consider two COVID-19 pop songs that took a debating, philosophical approach, in contrast to the straightforward, declarative songs of information introduced above. In Uganda, as in other parts of Africa (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986), there is a tradition of singing and storytelling in ways that demand active participation from audiences, requiring them not just to recite

back what is taught, but also to unpack proverbs and riddles and sometimes consider multiple sides of an issue before making their own judgment. This accords with educational ideals based on antiphonal community dialogue (as in ngoma), and learning-through-doing in the company of an experienced elder, which prevailed in Uganda before foreign teachers arrived. The latter instituted a rather different mode of education in classrooms, houses of worship, and development workshops—one premised more on the idea that students were moldable vessels to be filled with information and good habits, by means of efficient, analytical, methods of lecturing and testing (Ssekamwa 1997). Ugandans avidly embraced the classroom, the church service, and the workshop and repurposed them to their own social aspirational ends (Hanson 2010; Meinert 2009). Yet the older, more experiential and dialogical mode of education persisted and acquired an aura of alterity and, occasionally, resistance—particularly among poorer peoples who for a long time had little or no access to schools. If songs of information have a pronounced “school” character, songs of debate evoke this submerged yet potent alternative knowledge economy.

One modern manifestation of this alternative, indigenous-style education may be found today in the Ugandan popular music known as *kadongo kamu* (“one little guitar”)—a genre that dates back at least to the 1950s. Kadongo kamu singers regard themselves as teachers of the public, who offer something different from what students get in the school (Barrett-Gaines 2012; Mugambi 1994; Nannyonga Tamusuza 2002). In lyrical style, kadongo kamu songs tend to be the opposite of the “songs of information” discussed in the last section. Whereas songs of information are clear and well demarcated in their topics, kadongo kamu songs are typically oblique, wide-ranging, and multivalent. While songs of information are unequivocal in their messaging, kadongo kamu songs may approach issues from multiple, elaborate, sometimes conflicting, vantage points, with the expectation that listeners themselves will ponder a social problem in its complexity and arrive eventually at the right conclusions.

Siraje Ssebuliba’s “Coronavirus Okitukoze” is stylistically kadongo kamu in its use of the guitar, its rhythmic references to the 6/8 groove of traditional *baakisimba* dance, and its dense, complicated, lyrics in Luganda language. Ssebuliba begins his lyric with a proverb-laced self-introduction: “Siraje Ssebuliba, I have come like ants and termites that bite a mouth/ I sing in Luganda. I cannot hear something knocking and stay back, the China virus has caused my coming.” The term “China virus” may have a xenophobic tinge, as it did in President Donald Trump’s many utterances. Chinese entrepreneurial activities in Uganda, sometimes in visible alliance with the Museveni government, have been on the rise over the past decade and have aroused suspicion among some Ugandans. Ssebuliba is not content to lay the blame for COVID-19 on China, however. He locates the ultimate causes of the pandemic, rather, in a broader globalized politics, in which various “superpowers” vie for supremacy, to the detriment of countries like Uganda.

Probing the ultimate moral causes and consequences of the emergency, his rhetoric takes on a prophetic tone:

It undressed them [the “wise foreigners”] and now they are shameful.
Where there are wise people, there are always others who are wiser, sir.
I request you to know that, whoever is calling himself “superpower” /
Colleague, I request you to drop the pride, I only know one superpower
[God] and nothing else has ever equalled him / See how He has scattered us
and we have lost direction!

This passage demonstrates the way biblical tropes have been adopted into the *kadongo kamu* to give many songs a sage, prophetic voice, which is otherwise achieved through the use of traditional proverbs and other artifacts of “deep Luganda” language. The description of the foreigners as “undressed” and “shameful” is of course a reference to Adam and Eve. “See how He has scattered us and we have lost direction!” refers to the story of the Tower of Babel, which in Uganda is invoked in discussions of ethnolinguistic rivalry. While the “wise foreigners” are the objects of censure here for their excessive pride, Museveni lurks in the subtext as a culprit, for he is known to stake his presidential reputation on the cultivation of powerful foreign relations, particularly with the superpower US, but also with China, India, and northern European countries. The implication is that Museveni, in his hubristic courting of globalization, has failed to resolve Uganda’s ethnic divisions; indeed, he may have aggravated them.

Ssebuliba is additionally, by means of these biblical allusions, conjuring an alternative, apocalyptic, time frame for the emergency. If the government insists on the *now* of the bio-emergency, asserting its power by enforcing strict time schedules and curfews, Ssebuliba counters with an epic expansion of the emergency’s temporality, stretching from the garden of Eden to the end of days. The gist is that Uganda’s emergency is much larger, and more ongoing than the government would like to depict it. If the emergency is longer than advertised, then Museveni cannot merely depict himself as a heroic responder; he must accept his own culpability for the country’s present ills. In the song’s refrain, Ssebuliba introduces another image that recasts the government’s temporality of urgency: that of a birthing woman who, because of lockdown, cannot get to the hospital: “My second wife is in labor: where can she go to deliver?” This centering on the real predicament many pregnant Ugandan women faced during the COVID-19 lockdown cements the song’s overall themes of unfulfilled expectancy and thwarted reproduction. Ssebuliba implies that it is not only this woman who is unable to safely give birth, but also, by metaphorical extension, the whole country. The rebirth Uganda has been waiting for—that must happen for the country’s survival—cannot safely occur while Museveni’s regime clings to power; that is the real emergency the country faces.

The moral heart of *kadongo kamu*—sometimes popularly referred to as Uganda’s “country music”—is imagined to lie in Buganda’s rural villages, and

it is in a village that Ssebuliba stages his music video. Dressed in the unpretentious gray suit of a local councillor, wearing protective vinyl gloves, he presents himself as an instructor to the community and resolver of conflicts. Aided by mask-wearing women assistants, he shows locals how to use protective equipment and breaks up a fight between two young men. This is Ssebuliba's vision for how emergency health interventions should be conducted, as opposed to top-down government intervention, enforced by the police. What is needed, the video suggests, is a wise elder mediator such as himself within the rural community—someone who understands and cares about the local culture and can apply traditional principles of reciprocal humaneness and healthy social order in order to resolve conflicts. Ssebuliba is not cynical about emergency biomedical intervention in general—he merely contends that its politics should be organized differently.

Paya Paya Right and Junior K.'s "Corona," released in June 2020, staged a mock debate between two singers over the government's lockdown policies, in a dancehall-reggae style reminiscent of Bobi Wine's gruff-voiced music. At the beginning of "Corona," the gravelly voiced Paya Paya name-checks Wine, then proceeds to exchange verses with Junior K., weighing the advantages and disadvantages of following or defying the government's COVID-19 rules. Junior sings: "I would rather die of poverty than die of Corona," to which Paya Paya responds, "No Junior, I would rather die of Corona than die of poverty." Junior argues that Ugandans are being too harsh on their election leaders and should heed their leaders' advice. Paya Paya counters that the government is not providing adequately for the people, that police are beating innocents with sticks, that money is the only thing that matters to leadership: "Everything is monetized; masks are for money; sanitizer is for money." The song closes with an injunction to "ghetto people" (another reference to Wine's movement) to take up the debate: "this is our feeling; here is the discussion, debate on it, you know?" This recommendation to have a debate is partly sarcastic, insofar as both propositions raised in the debate are intolerable: either observe lockdown rules and starve, or disobey them and face imprisonment, beatings, or death at the hands of the police.

In the "Corona" video, the two singers are seated in a primary school classroom, their adult frames balanced uncomfortably on children's chairs. A third adult, in academic cap and gown, sits between them, earnestly taking notes and adjudicating the debate. This school setting is significant on several levels. First, the singers are occupying the official school space of knowledge production, in a way that may seem amusingly transgressive, given their reggae musical style and personal appearance (both are dressed fairly conservatively, but Right wears a thick chain around his neck). In Uganda, reggae in Bobi Wine's style has been associated with marijuana smoking, wearing braids, and other less-than-respectable aspects of urban youth culture, so it may be titillating to see this music performed in the straightlaced context of the classroom. It is an image of youth taking over, and filling up, the

government's controlled spaces, resonant with Bobi Wine's symbolic occupation of the streets (and that of Besigye before him).

Since its colonial installation, the classroom has been an iconic site for the behavioral disciplining of ordinary Ugandans by the missions and the government (Ranger 1983; Meinert 2009). It has also, as mentioned above, been a focal point for the aspirations of Ugandan people. This video likely alludes not just to the institution of school in general, however, but also, more specifically, to schools as they have been (under)developed by Museveni's program of Universal Primary Education (UPE). Initiated in 1997, UPE was heralded by Museveni as one of his signature achievements and celebrated by some foreign observers. For many Ugandans, however, UPE as actually implemented has been a crushing disappointment. Inadequate funding has led to large class sizes, a chronic lack of books and other instructional materials, and abysmal teacher pay, resulting in inexpert instruction and frequent teacher absences (Meinert 2009). As mediocre education has become accessible to everyone, the value of a primary education in terms of career prospects is perceived to have been diminished. While more children can go to school, stark social inequalities between "higher-standard" and "lower-standard" education persist, with wealthier, well connected families sending their children to elite private schools (Tromp & Datzberger 2019). The closure of schools for the pandemic lockdown was likely experienced by some not just as a stand-alone crisis, but also as another egregious episode in the unfolding tragedy of Ugandan public education. By staging their song in a primary school classroom, Paya Paya Right and Junior K were stirring up specific frustrations surrounding school and presenting themselves and Bobi Wine as the youthful movement that must take control of the system and remedy Museveni's mistakes for the good of the country. This is not the last time we will see the classroom thematized in this way: the song "Am Present, Sir," discussed in the next section, likewise makes a critical, comedic, intervention into school space, in the era of UPE.

Songs of Derision

We have discussed how some Ugandan singers, particularly in the kadongo kamu genre, present themselves as teachers, alternative to the teachers in school. In what we call "songs of derision," singers take a more defiant, mocking stance toward government. The singer adopts the role of a delinquent, incorrigible, student, or, alternatively, a clumsy teacher who is unable to assert control over the classroom. Songs of derision exult in rudeness and carnal indulgence, in the face of Museveni's declared campaign against "social indiscipline." Protesting what they perceive to be a foreclosure of conventional politics by an authoritarian state, they regroup in a politics of the body and its irrepressible urges.

Achille Mbembe applied Bakhtin's theory of the "carnavalesque" to African cultural expressions under authoritarian conditions, noting the prevalence of images of eating, excretion, and copulation (Mbembe 1992;

Bakhtin 1984). These carnivalesque expressions were, he surmised, ultimately politically ineffectual, insofar as they could be drowned out by authoritarian governments' own spectacles of appetite and obscenity. That said, when Museveni has committed himself to a pose of "scientific" authority in the state of emergency, carnivalesque expressions in popular culture may be used to attack these pretensions. In Bakhtin's original theorization, carnivalesque performance is not just iconoclastic, but also connective or copulative: in sex, eating, and excreting, bodies interpenetrate in ways that are resistant to the attempts of rulers at total control. It is interesting to consider how the meanings of carnivalesque performance may be changing in a global internet era, which has been characterized by spontaneous, ludic, formations of collectivities online. Songs and videos about casual sex under the teacher's nose may refer metaphorically to activities of online socializing which, by virtue of their spontaneousness and lack of centralized planning, may slip past government control. Anthropologist Jesse Shipley has discussed the phenomenon of spontaneously interconnective online events in an article on the Ghanaian/diasporic pop music phenomenon *azonto*. A major appeal of this dance craze, Shipley suggests, has been its online viral dissemination, which creates for participating youth a sense of unbounded international mobility and connectivity. Notably, the signature attitude of *azonto* dance is one of youthful bemusement or derision: a "bored pout and solemn stare, a look at once flirtatious, mocking, and confident" (Shipley 2013:373). Such a derisive dance seems to signal a disregard for the old disciplinary system, buoyed by the internet's experiences of virtual mobility and interconnectivity.

The two COVID-19 songs we consider in this section are animated by a carnivalesque spirit. EeZzy's "Tumbiza Sound," one of the biggest hits of 2020 and 2021, encourages listeners to have dance parties in their homes in defiance of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. When the police come, they are advised to turn down the sound ("*kendeeza* sound!") to avoid detection, then "kick it" back up ("*tumbiiza* sound!") as soon as the police have moved on. The lyrics, in a deliberately crude mixture of Luganda and English, are delivered in party-MC yelling/chanting style. The chorus is, "While you all are in lockdown / As for us, we are in bend down / While you all are in curfew / As for us we are in 'brand new'." "Bend down" refers to the infamous "bend over" dance, and is a main selling point of the song, depicted in the video by EeZzy and a female dancer. The bend-over dance, popularly understood to be imported from Jamaican dancehall (though there are similar dances in Ugandan indigenous tradition [Gaunt 2015]), has been notorious in the Ugandan club scene for at least a decade. It is a signifier of libertine nightlife under the radar of government and respectable society. One nightclub offering a bend-over night advertised "no cameras allowed!" Bend-over dance is carnivalesque in the sense just given: it is about the potential to spontaneously connect with others, in a way the government cannot fully control. Part of the story of bend-over dance, gleefully recounted in the back pages of tabloid newspapers, is that even the powerful and respectable are

liable to succumb to its temptations. Onlookers were delighted when, in 2020, a group of eight female law students, clad in black business suits, got into trouble with their school administration and the Ugandan government for posting a video of themselves vigorously bending-over to “Tumbiza Sound.”

In the context of the election, the call of “Tumbiza Sound” to evade the police and get together to party had specific political implications. If Museveni was going to tightly restrict people’s ability to assemble in public, then Wine’s youthful followers would simply find other, more clandestine, ways to gather and carry on their movement. In one part of the lyric, EeZzy switches momentarily out of mocking mode, to make a more direct criticism of government by listing COVID-19 items that were advocated by government but never provided to citizens:

Now to the UCC (Uganda Communication Commission): we request sanitizers, give us more sanitizers, provide us with sanitizers and we will party from home. The government promised to give us face masks; get us face masks, give us more face masks so that we can party from our houses. I was talking about distance, eh! Social distancing; let’s practice social distancing in our houses and we party. I suggest that the curfew time finds us in our houses. If they find you in a bar; they arrest and imprison you.

The political implications of “Tumbiza Sound” multiplied over time, as campaigns continued to be waged on the ground against government prescriptions, and police violence increased. At rallies, Wine’s supporters took to chanting a phrase from the song: *emitima jakaluba!* —“our hearts got hardened.” Not surprisingly, the song attracted threats of censorship from government. The Ministry of Health requested that the song be banned for its encouragements to ignore lockdown protocols. These threats were never, however, followed up by the actual removal of “Tumbiza Sound” from radio and television. Instead, EeZzy was asked to produce a new version of “Tumbiza Sound” in line with government protocols. Two days after this injunction, a hitherto unknown artist, Emma Sharp, seized the initiative and remixed Tumbiza Sound as “Kendeeza Sound” (“Turn Down the Sound”), tinkering with EeZzy’s anthem to make a song warning that people should obey the rules or face the police. This unlicensed remix enjoyed some success online, provoking laughter among Ugandan music fans, with one commentator cheerfully chiming in, “I gotta tell you guys, it sounds terrible!” (Urban TV Uganda 2021). Without comment, EeZzy simply reappropriated Sharp’s remix under his own name, adding cartoon images clipped from the Hollywood animated movie *Zootopia* (featuring a police squad of cute animals). The absurdity of the Sharp remix, and then the original singer’s cartoon cooptation of the remix, only added to the song’s derisive aura. EeZzy did not bend to the government’s pressure, but rather stepped aside and let online processes of bricolage dissolve the government’s injunction into triviality.

Another COVID-19 song and video in a bawdy vein—this one in a classroom setting—was Twilight Ug’s “Am Present, Sir,” released in July 2020. Twilight takes the part of a teacher taking attendance in a classroom where all the students have names curiously derived from the pandemic lexicon: “Muhumuza Corona,” “Nagadya Sanatiza,” “Byamukama Virus” and so on. As the teacher fumbles through this odd attendance list, and then proceeds to recite the government’s official COVID-19 prevention rules, the students take advantage of his distraction to engage in heavy petting under their desks. This escalates, inevitably, into the bend-over dance, organized in a conga line, with the teacher impotently shaking his long stick in agitation. This plot is clearly similar to that of “Tumbiza Sound”: the government tries to impose rules on the social and sexual behavior of the youth, and the youth blithely ignore it.

“Am Present, Sir” calls attention to biomedical jargon as a kind of knowledge/power that the government harnesses but cannot fully control. Since its colonial installation, the classroom has been the site for the teaching of words that are not the words Ugandan students typically employ with their families at home, particularly if they come from less privileged backgrounds. The disciplining of language use in the classroom has been common, with students receiving canings for slipping into their local vernacular at the wrong time (the teacher’s stick in the video reminds us of this). Conversely, students historically have been rewarded for learning the “correct” terms for things; advanced knowledge of English—especially its technical lexicons—is considered to be a key to career success. What is interesting about Twilight’s song is that it is the children who have brought the new COVID-19 jargon words to class, embedded in their names, while it is the teacher who seems to be struggling to keep up. The hormonally addled teens do not demonstrate any awareness of, or interest in, the meanings of words such as “sanitizer” and “corona.” They carry these new words unconsciously. We have considered two ways of interpreting this, which listeners might entertain simultaneously. First, and most straightforwardly, this may be an indictment of Uganda’s school system (particularly UPE) for failing to teach children and their parents the correct meanings of words. The buffoonish teacher is clearly not up to the task and cannot even govern his own classroom.

A second possible interpretation of the student’s jargony names posits a kind of deflation of officialdom’s power over language. This urgent, technical, vocabulary—“coronavirus,” “sanitizer,” and so on—becomes, in public circulation, mere words, stripped of their intended meanings and endowed with new ones. The song and video seem to take delight in this chaotic garbling and resignification of weighty words. The viewer’s enthusiasm is likely to be with the partying students, who are played with infectious energy by the Bullet dancers. The failing teacher, too, whose monotonous informational COVID-19 lecturing fails to distract the students from their play, is a source of amusement. In short, much of the appeal of this song is in its derisiveness, its refusal to take things seriously. Ugandan audiences may enjoy the song for its joyous iconoclasm, even as they may also interpret it a serious

commentary on the failings of UPE. We would highlight, additionally, the theme of free, chaotic, circulation of information, manifest in the students' strange names. Perhaps this is another commentary on the internet and its wild, distorting, informational flows and remixing. That a biomedical word ends up surprisingly as someone's name may be attributed to traditional Ugandan naming practices, but it is at the same time evocative of what happens with words and other signs as, in rapid, ubiquitous, online circulation, they become stripped of their original meanings. Progressively detached from the original significance of its content, circulation becomes circulation for its own sake—an emergent social happening, void of stable meaning, but radiating connective potential. Under an authoritarian, seemingly impossible-to-dislodge government, such absurdist happenings, enabled by the dynamics of the internet, hold appeal.

Like “Tumbiza Sound,” “Am Present, Sir” was released in at least two video versions, the second of which, labelled “clean” on YouTube, was likely made at the government's demand. The most apparent difference is that all the students are now wearing surgical masks, though most wear them in ineffectual ways—for example, on their chins or on the tops of their heads. They are also dressed in matching white uniforms, giving the impression that they are part of a government team. The symbolism of these changes seems to be that the young dancers are now incorporated as part of the government's COVID-prevention initiative, even if they are still demonstrating how *not* to behave. Notably, too, the teacher is no longer a clown, but presents himself as a competent, if frustrated, figure of authority. Overall, the “clean” version is still dirty (the bend-over dance makes its appearance), but significantly less derisive.

Conclusion

We have considered a selection of Ugandan pop songs about COVID-19 and lockdown that were released in 2020, in the peak months of a violent presidential election season. Museveni took the pandemic as an opportunity to assume emergency powers, which would license him to shut down his opponents' campaign activities, and generally to intensify an atmosphere of government intimidation and control. Ugandan musicians, following the lead of the artist-candidate Bobi Wine, responded with an array of sung critiques of the government, attempting to disrupt and restage Museveni's emergency media event. We have examined a selection of these songs, considering their different rhetorical strategies in historical context. Wine's own song, which we have characterized as a “song of information,” seemed calculated to steal Museveni's role as emergency informer-of-the-masses. The historical rivalry between Wine and Bebe Cool—the celebrity artist Museveni tapped to lead the government's own musical outreach—ensured that the listening public would interpret this song in terms of the electoral battle, rather than as neutral messaging.

Two other songs were “songs of debate,” which countered the government’s urgent, declarative tone with questions and doubts. One of these songs, belonging to the kadongo kamu genre, confronted the government’s temporality of biopolitical urgency with alternative temporalities—biblical epic on the one hand, and the urgency of a woman’s birth on the other. Another song, structured as a debate between two singers, enjoined listeners to consider the problem of Ugandan COVID-19 in its complexity and make up their own minds, rather than simply following the dictates of government. These two songs, encouraging listeners to exercise their own intellectual and moral-judgment capacities, invoke a long tradition of dialogical, riddling education in Uganda, which is seen as counterposed to classroom education, as it was established under colonial rule, and recently, disappointingly, revamped as UPE by the Museveni government.

Finally, we characterized two songs as “songs of derision,” which, in a carnivalesque mood, explored the possibility of outright defiance of government’s COVID-19 rules. Both songs seemed to advocate subterfuge of the government, with one recommending that people hold parties in their houses when the police aren’t looking, and another staging a kind of classroom mutiny as the teacher ineffectually tries to share COVID-19 information. Whether or not these songs were intended to actually promote disobedience against COVID-19 safety rules, they were certainly meant to highlight the limits of the Ugandan government’s capacity to control the behaviors of its citizens. Not only the government’s lockdown misrule, but also the longer-term failures of its trumpeted UPE education, are evoked as problems to be sung and danced against.

We have situated these COVID-19 songs within a deeper history of musical health-politics in Uganda, as well as within the global history of emergency biopolitics. The community singing-and-dancing ritual institution of ngoma has long been not only one in which individuals reaffirm their ordained place in the hierarchical body politic, but also one within which there have been opportunities for divergent public expressions and actions. The spectacular wars on disease which British colonials brought to the territory introduced new ways of thinking about the government of life at population scale; they also proved capable of being merged with Uganda’s indigenous politics of public health, with powerful individuals competitively seeking advantage within the new epidemiological apparatuses. An involving, multi-layered, public-health politics, largely expressed in music and dance, characterized Uganda’s addressing of the HIV/AIDS epidemic beginning in the 1980s. The COVID-19 pandemic has provoked similar political dynamics, with singers asserting their right to define the emergency more expansively than the president would like to define it. If songs have been particularly aggressive in their challenges to the government’s public health agenda, this is due to the peculiar situation of a presidential contest between a president who is bitterly disliked by certain demographics being challenged by a candidate who is himself a famous singer of politically critical songs. If these songs take much of their meaning from the merged crises of the presidential

election and the pandemic lockdown, we have suggested, following Žižek, that they are also about broader issues of social imagination. The pandemic has everywhere disrupted our basic social fabrics, troubling our embodied ways of interacting with one another, and artists everywhere are seeking to rebuild, or “musically scaffold,” toward some new, as yet undetermined, social paradigm. These songs and videos, we contend, variously grapple with our ways of socially coordinating our bodies, emotions, and ideas. Themes of bodily discomfort and desire run through the set—from the grown men balancing on children’s chairs in “Corona,” to the image of a woman unable to give birth in “Coronavirus Okitukoze,” to the students’ covert fumbings in “Am Present, Sir.” We read these as reflections on the pandemic’s unsettling of embodied sociality, and projections toward some emergent, post-COVID-19 sociality. The internet, with its experienced social and political novelties, seems to haunt some of the song and video narratives, and the rapid circulation of songs online in itself called attention to the internet’s potentiality. The fact that the Museveni government has tried to crack down on internet usage has only heightened curiosity about its potential for revolutionary transformation.

In January 2021, Museveni declared a decisive victory over Wine, announcing an electoral margin slightly wider than the one he had achieved over Besigye in the last election. These results cannot be taken as veritable, given the corruption and violence that plagued the election. International observers charged with monitoring the polls walked out in protest (Abrahamsen & Bareebe 2016, 2021). Bobi Wine continues to dispute the results and remains the leading figure of the opposition—his National People’s Party having acquired a significant number of seats in this same election. A feature-length film about his presidential campaign had its debut at the 2022 Venice Film Festival and will receive major distribution by National Geographic in 2023. From March 2020 to July 2022, 167,503 COVID-19 cases were reported in Uganda, and 3,623 deaths (likely a considerable undercount). The country continues to struggle with the economic, social, and psychological effects of the lockdown, in addition to those of the disease itself.

References

- Abrahamsen, Rita, and Gerald Bareebe. 2016. “Uganda’s 2016 Elections: Not Even Faking It Anymore.” *African Affairs* 115 (461): 751–65.
- . 2021. “Uganda’s Fraudulent Election.” *Journal of Democracy* 32 (2): 90–104.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 1995. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by D. Heller-Roazen. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- . 2005. *State of Exception*. Translated by K. Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Aikins, A.D.G., 2020. “‘Colonial Virus’? Creative Arts and Public Understanding of COVID-19 in Ghana.” *Journal of the British Academy* 8: 401–13.
- Allen, Lara. 2004. “Music and Politics in Africa.” *Social Dynamics* 2: 1–19.

- Anena, Harriet. 2018. "The End of Allowing: Bobi Wine, Bebe Cool, and Uganda's Bottle Revolution." <https://popula.com/2018/09/20/the-end-of-allowing/>
- Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Asasira, Anita Desire. 2012. "Politics of Competition in the Pearl of Africa (PAM) Music Awards: Construction of Popular Music in Uganda." In *Ethnomusicology in East Africa. Perspectives from Uganda and Beyond*, edited by S. Nannyonga-Tamusuza and T. Solomon, 155–69. Oxford: African Books Collective.
- Askew, Kelly M. 2002. *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bank, Leslie, and Nellie Sharpley. 2022. *COVID and Custom in Rural South Africa: Culture, Healthcare and the State*. London: C. Hurst.
- Barrett-Gaines, Kathryn. 2012. *One Little Guitar: The Words of Paul Job Kafeero*. Kampala: Fountain.
- Barz, Gregory. 2006. *Singing for Life: HIV/AIDS and Music in Uganda*. New York: Routledge.
- Bianchi, Raffaella. 2018. "Istanbul Sounding like Revolution: The Role of Music in the Gezi Park Occupy Movement." *Popular Music* 37 (2): 212–36.
- Boyd, Malcolm, ed. 1992. *Music and the French Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Campus Bee. 2014. "Bobi Wine Accuses Bebe Cool of Being Gay." <https://campusbee.ug/entertainment/bobi-wine-accuses-bebe-cool-gay/>
- Cohen, Meghan Sobel, and Karen McIntyre. 2020. "The State of Press Freedom in Uganda." *International Journal of Communication (Online)* https://go-gale-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&u=unc_main&id=GALE%7CA632409946&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon.
- Dayan, Daniel, and Elihu Katz. 1992. *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Decker, Alicia. 2010. "Idi Amin's Dirty War: Subversion, Sabotage, and the Battle to Keep Uganda Clean, 1971–1979." *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 43 (3): 489–513.
- De Waal, Alex. 2021. *New Pandemics, Old Politics: Two Hundred Years of War on Disease and Its Alternatives*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Doyle, Shane. 2013. *Before HIV: Fertility and Mortality in East Africa: 1900–1980*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Epstein, Helen. 2020. "In Uganda, Another Museveni Crackdown." *New York Review of Books*, November 25. <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/11/25/in-uganda-another-museveni-crackdown/>
- Foucault, Michel. 2010. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France*, translated by Graham Burchell. London: Picador.
- Friesinger, J. 2021. "Patronage, Repression, and Co-optation: Bobi Wine and the Political Economy of Activist Musicians in Uganda." *Africa Spectrum* 56 (2): 127–50.
- Gaunt, Kyra D. 2015. "YouTube, Twerking & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27 (3): 244–73.
- Giordano, Filippo, Elide Scarlata, Mariagrazia Baroni, Elionora Gentile, Filomina Puntillo, Nicola Brienza, and Loreto Gesualdo. 2020. "Receptive music therapy to

- reduce stress and improve wellbeing in Italian clinical staff involved in COVID-19 pandemic: a preliminary study.” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 70: 1–5.
- Grasse, Don, et al. 2020. “Autocratic Governments Are Using Coronavirus as a Pretext to Clamp Down on Opponents.” *Washington Post* July 31. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/07/31/autocratic-governments-are-using-covid-19-pretext-clamp-down-opponents/>
- Gueye, Marame. 2013. “Urban Guerrilla Poetry: The Movement Y’en a Marre and the Socio-Political Influences of Hip Hop in Senegal.” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 6 (3): 22–42.
- Hanson, Holly Elisabeth. 2010. “Indigenous Adaptation: Uganda’s Village Schools, ca. 1880–1937.” *Comparative Education Review* 54 (2): 155–74.
- Hepp, Andreas, and Nick Couldry. 2010. “Introduction: Media Events in Globalized Media Cultures.” In *Media Events in a Global Age*, edited by A. Hepp and N. Couldry. New York: Routledge.
- Hoppe, K.A. 1997. “Lords of the Fly: Colonial Visions and Revisions of African Sleeping-sickness Environments on Ugandan Lake Victoria, 1906–61.” *Africa* 67 (1): 86–105.
- Human Rights Watch. 2020. “Uganda: Authorities Weaponize COVID-19 for Repression.” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/20/uganda-authorities-weaponize-covid-19-repression>.
- Independent*. 2021. “Uganda’s Teenage Pregnancy Five Times Higher than COVID-19 Positive Cases.” December 5. <https://www.independent.co.ug/ugandas-teenage-pregnancies-five-times-higher-than-covid-19-positive-cases/>
- Janzen, John. 1992. *Ngoma*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kafumbe, Damascus. 2018. *Tuning the Kingdom: Kawugulu Musical Performance, Politics, and Storytelling in Buganda*. Rochester: Boydell & Brewer.
- Kalungi, Nicholas. 2016. “Worlds Apart! Have Bebe Cool and Bobi Wine Lived in Parallel Musical Worlds?” *HiPipo* August 27. <https://www.hipipo.com/of-bebe-cool-and-bobi-wines-contrasting-careers/#:~:text=I%20learnt%20that%20even%20though,was%20the%20key%20to%20Success>
- Krueger, Joel. 2019. “Music as Affective Scaffolding.” In *Music and Consciousness 2: Worlds, Practices, Modalities*, edited by R. Herbert, D. Clarke, and E. Clarke, 53–70. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kodesh, Neil. 2010. *Beyond the Royal Gaze: Clanship and Public Healing in Buganda*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Klingenberg, Krystal Kabakama. 2019. “Toward a More ‘Modern’ Music Industry: The Creative Economy of Popular Music in Uganda.” PhD diss., Harvard University.
- Lemke, Thomas. 2005. “‘A Zone of Indistinction’: A Critique of Giorgio Agamben’s Concept of Biopolitics.” *Outlines. Critical Practice Studies* 7 (1): 3–13.
- Lipenga, Ken Junior. 2021. “The *Madando* Rhetoric: Musical Critiques of Electoral Management in Malawi.” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47 (6): 935–50.
- Makwa, Dominic D. B. 2020. “Uganda’s Musicians Are Fighting COVID-19: Why Governments Should Work with Them.” *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/ugandas-musicians-are-fighting-covid-19-why-government-should-work-with-them-136960>
- Mbembe, Achille. 1992. “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony.” *Africa* 62 (1): 3–37.
- McDonald, David. 2019. “Framing the ‘Arab Spring: Hip Hop, Social Media, and the American News Media.” *Journal of Folklore Research*.
- McDonald, Glenn. 2020. “The Sound of the Virus.” Playlist, *Spotify* July 27. <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5iz0GLSFdfR5sTX50Jezwn>

- Meinert, Lotte. 2009. *Hopes in Friction: Schooling, Health, and Everyday Life in Uganda*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age.
- Misk, Kemegisha. 2021. "Tears OF COVID 19: Experience at Uganda Cancer Institute In-Patient." *Making Global Connections: Newsletter of the SIOPPODC Nursing Working Group*. https://siop-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Making-Global-Connections-COVID-19_June-2020_SIOP-PODC-Nursing_FINAL-3-1.pdf
- Mugambi, Helen Nabasuta. 1994. "Intersections: Gender, Orality, Text, and Female Space in Contemporary Kiganda Radio Songs." *Research in African Literatures* 25 (3): 47–70.
- Mulemi, Benson A. 2021. "Lyrics and Artistic Improvisations in Health Promotion for the COVID-19 Pandemic Control in East Africa." *Global Health Promotion* 28 (1): 23–32.
- Mutuyaba, Michael. 2022. "From Voting to Walking: The 2011 Walk-to-Work Protest Movement in Uganda." In *Popular Protest, Political Opportunities, and Change in Africa*, edited by E. Sanchez. London: Routledge.
- Nannyonga-Tamusuza, Sylvia. 2002. "Gender, Ethnicity, and Politics in Kadongo-Kamu Music of Uganda: Analysing the Song Kayanda." In *Playing with Identities in Contemporary Music in Africa*, edited by M. Palmberg and A. Kirkegaard, 134–47. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind : The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey.
- Nyabola, Nanjala. 2018. *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era is Transforming Politics in Kenya*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Omolo-Okalebo, Fredrick. 2011. "Evolution of Town Planning Ideas, Plans and their Implementation in Kampala City 1903–2004." PhD diss., Makerere University and Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden.
- Orejuela, Fernando, and Stephanie Shonekan, eds. 2018. *Black Lives Matter and Music: Protest, Intervention, Reflection*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Padmanabha, K.V., and S. Kumar. 2020. "Health Communication through Folk Media: A Study Based on Yakshagana—A South Indian Dance Drama on Covid-19." *Mass Communicator: International Journal of Communication Studies* 14 (3): 20–26.
- Parivudhiphongs, A., 2020. "COVID-19—You Can't Stop the Beat!" *Journal of Urban Culture Research* 20: 3–9.
- Perullo, Alex. 2005. "Hooligans and Heroes: Youth Identity and Hip-Hop in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania." *Africa Today* 51 (4): 75–101.
- . 2015. *Ugandan Music in the Marketing Era: The Branded Arena*. New York: Palgrave.
- Pier, David G. 2021. "The Spectre of Rootless Youth (*Bayaaye*) in *Kulyennyngi*, a Novel of Amin-era Uganda." *Africa* 91 (4): 641–660.
- Ranger, Terence O. 1975. *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890–1970: The Beni Ngoma*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1983. "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa." In *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sarki, Ahmed M. 2020. "Uganda as a Role Model for Pandemic Containment." *American Journal of Public Health* 110 (12): 1800–1802.
- Schoenbrun, David L., 1998. *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.

- da Silva, Issa Sikiti. 2020. "The Eyes of the Storm: Spies Are on the Streets of Uganda Making Sure Everyone Abides by Covid-19 Rules." *Index on Censorship* 49 (2): 14–17.
- Shipley, Jesse Weaver. 2013. "Transnational Circulation and Digital Fatigue in Ghana's Azonto Dance Craze." *American Ethnologist* 40 (2): 362–81.
- Ssekamwa, J.C. 1997. *History and Development of Education in Uganda*. Kampala: Fountain.
- Thampi, N., Y. Longtin, A. Peters, D. Pittet, and K. Overy. 2020. "It's in Our Hands: A Rapid, International Initiative to Translate a Hand Hygiene Song during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Hospital Infection* 105 (3): 574–76.
- Thompson, Rachel, Jerry John Nutor, and Julene K. Johnson. 2020. "Communicating Awareness about COVID-19 through Songs: An Example from Ghana." *Frontiers in Public Health* 8. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2020.607830/full>
- Tromp, Rosanne Elisabeth, and Simone Datzberger. 2019. "Global Education Policies versus Local Realities: Insights from Uganda and Mexico." *Compare* 51 (3): 356–74.
- Tudoroiu, Theodor. 2014. "Social Media and Revolutionary Waves: The Case of the Arab Spring." *New Political Science* 36 (3): 346–65.
- Tuck, Michael William. 1997. "Syphilis, Sexuality, and Social Control: A History of Venereal Disease in Colonial Uganda." PhD diss., Northwestern University.
- Urban TV Uganda. 2021. "Kendeza battles Tumbiza sound as Kendeza sound gives song new meaning." Youtube video, January 7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNm3cAxGkzA>
- UNESCO. 2020. "#DontGoViral: UNESCO and i4Policy launch a campaign to crowdsource local content to combat the Infodemic in Africa." April 1, <https://en.unesco.org/news/dontgoviral-unesco-and-i4policy-launch-campaign-crowdsource-local-content-combat-infodemic>.
- van der Merwe, Liesl, Ewie Erasmus, Janelize Morelli, Hetta Potgieter, Julia Modise, Etienne Viviers, and Joy Meyer. 2021. "Stories of the Role Musicking Plays in Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Africa." *Psychology of Music* 50 (4): 1059–1076. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03057356211026959>.
- Vaughan, Meghan. 1991. *Curing their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness*. London: Polity.
- Walulya, Gerald, and Goretta Nassanga. 2020. "Democracy at Stake: Self-Censorship as a Strategy for Journalists." *Media and Communication* 8 (1): 5–14.
- Webel, Mari K. 2019. *The Politics of Disease Control: Sleeping Sickness in Eastern Africa, 1890–1920*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Wilkins, Sam, Richard Vokes, and Moses Khisa. 2021. "Briefing: Contextualizing the Bobi Wine Factor in Uganda's 2021 Elections." *African Affairs* 120 (148): 629–43.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2020. *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost*. New York: OR Books.

Note

1. The most famous instance of this was Museveni's recitation of Banyankole folk poetry as a kind of "rap." His "You Want Another Rap?" speech became an internet meme and, for a brief interval, gave the aging president a boost in youth support in advance of the 2011 elections (Klingenberg 2019:117–18).