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Makmende Amerudi: Kenya's Collective Reimagining as a Meme of Aspiration

Brian Ekdale & Melissa Tully

In 2010, Kenya's first internet meme arrived in the form of a vigilante named Makmende, the action-hero-inspired protagonist of a music video. Within days of the video's release, fans started creating Makmende tales, videos, and artwork, and circulating these works online. In this article, we analyze the Makmende phenomenon to understand why this video inspired Kenya's first internet meme, what the meme says about contemporary Kenya and politics, and how this meme broadens our understanding of global participatory culture. We argue that a group of young, urban Kenyans seized the moment to reappropriate stereotypes of weakness into aspirations of strength as they asserted Kenya into the global conversation online. Through this meme, Makmende became more than a fictional super hero—he became a symbol of Kenya's present and future. We situate this meme in its cultural and social context to analyze how and why Kenyans used Makmende to represent themselves. The participatory playfulness around Makmende created a meme of aspiration through which a niche of Kenyans collectively reimagined a hypermasculine hero who embodied youth hopes and visions for the country. This article draws from multiple texts about and within the Makmende meme and observational research in Kenya before, during, and after the height of the Makmende craze.

Keywords: Participatory Culture; Online Memes; Playful Nationalism; Meme of Aspiration; Kenya

In March 2010, a vigilante appeared in Nairobi, ready to take Kenya by storm. Sporting an Afro hairstyle, open collar, and dangling gold chains, he chased down criminals, rescued a kidnapped woman, and defeated the area's most notorious thug. At first, few witnessed his feats of greatness, but shortly thousands around the world marveled at his skill and style. They put him on the cover of *GQ*, *Time*, and *Esquire*.

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They recruited him to run for president. They gathered online to exchange tales of his might and sexual prowess. And they thanked him for becoming a celebrity who made Kenyans proud. The vigilante's name is Makmende; he is a character in a music video.

Makmende is the protagonist of the video "Ha-He" by the Kenyan experimental pop group Just a Band. Within a week of its release on YouTube (Justabandwidth, 2010), "Ha He" received nearly 25,000 views and fans started creating original Makmende tales, videos, and artwork, leading media outlets like CNN to label Makmende "Kenya's first viral internet sensation" (McKenzie, 2010).¹ In this article, we analyze the Makmende phenomenon to understand why this video inspired Kenya's first internet meme and what the meme says about contemporary Kenya. We argue that young, urban Kenyans, who pride themselves as technological innovators, seized the moment to reappropriate outdated stereotypes of weakness into aspirations of strength as they asserted Kenya into the global online conversation. Through this meme, Makmende became more than a fictional super hero—he became a symbol of Kenya's present and future. While some have discussed Makmende as an example of a transnational cultural flow originating in the Global South (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Zuckerman, 2013), we situate this meme in its cultural and social context to analyze how and why Kenyans used Makmende to represent themselves. While most video memes are rooted in imitation and parody (Shifman, 2012), the participatory playfulness around Makmende created a *meme of aspiration* through which a certain niche of Kenyans collectively reimagined a hypermasculine hero who could lead the country toward political and economic stability at home, and cultural and technological dominance abroad. This article draws from multiple texts about and within the Makmende meme, including videos, artwork, tweets, Facebook posts, blog messages, and news reports.² This study is based on in-depth analysis of those texts as well as observational research conducted by the authors, who were in Kenya before, during, and after the height of the Makmende craze.

Participatory Playfulness and Memetic Cynicism

Building on de Certeau's (1984) concept of productive consumption, Jenkins (2006) argues that the current media environment, in which many participate in creative and interpretive textual activities, represents a participatory culture. In participatory culture, "fans reject the idea of a definitive version produced, authorized, and regulated by some media conglomerate [and] envision a world where all of us can participate in the creation and circulation of central cultural myths" (Jenkins, 2003, p. 289). For Jenkins, not only are audiences interpretive, they are also active participants who create meaning through appropriating, remixing, and recirculating texts. Such activities are often entwined in play, the pleasure derived from engaging with media and working within and around controls set by others (Fiske, 1987; Kerr, Kücklich, & Brereton, 2006). In fact, Booth (2010) argues that participatory culture is animated by a "philosophy of playfulness" in which fans derive pleasure from their

participation in creative, interpretive activities (p. 2). By engaging with others in creative play, fans experience even greater pleasure from sharing their textual activities and connecting with participatory communities (Booth, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2013). To be sure, participatory playfulness does not erase the structural constraints of institutions and industries eager to coerce, control, and profit from the labor of participatory communities (Andrejevic, 2008; Shefrin, 2004), yet, participant agency is central to determining which texts are remixed and spread widely (Jenkins et al., 2013). Additionally, with the emergence of YouTube and other online video-sharing sites, the creative inspiration for participatory culture and the source material for internet memes are often produced by fellow participants, not institutions.

YouTube has become a popular site of participatory culture, as it provides a platform to access, create, and distribute videos and interact with others through comments, ratings, favorites, and shares (Burgess & Green, 2009). Some videos take on a life outside of the original upload as they become appropriated into memes, a popular manifestation of online participatory culture. Richard Dawkins (1989) first introduced the concept of a meme to indicate a cultural element—analogueous to a gene in biology—that makes up one part of “the soup of human culture” (p. 192). According to Dawkins, memes, such as ideas, trends, songs, and phrases, become engrained into human culture over time through processes of replication, imitation, and evolution. In the context of the internet, the word “meme” is used to signify a joke or a fad that becomes widely adapted and repeated for a short period of time (Burgess, 2008). Internet memes typically come in and out of fashion quickly and have textual “hooks” or key signifiers that audiences and creators can easily grasp onto (Burgess, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). These textual hooks are the features that make content memorable and spreadable (Jenkins et al., 2013) and, thus, become the building blocks for creative play in resulting memes.

As memes spread to wider audiences, they are adapted to fit different cultural contexts. For example, Shifman and Thelwall (2009) tracked the online manifestations of a widely circulated joke and discovered that while the core structure of the joke remained intact, certain elements evolved to become more relevant, and therefore funnier, to different national and cultural groups. Such adoptions and adaptations are consistent with how globalization theorists view the circulation of cultural products through the entanglement of global and local forces (Kraidy, 2005). Global citizens are active participants in the exchange of ideas, media, and technology, a process in which cultural products are adapted for and by local audiences. Martín-Barbero (1993) referred to this process as mediation, “a ‘living reading’ made by the people from the perspective of their life context and the social movement that their lives are wrapped up in” (p. 130). Within global participatory culture, especially for those with access to production and distribution technologies, mediation is more than a “reading.” Global participants construct culturally situated meanings while also producing culturally resonant texts, appropriating global symbols into local contexts. Yet, for a variety of reasons, including language barriers, researcher bias, and the concentration of internet use in wealthier countries, most research on memetic videos has focused on participatory activities in American and

European contexts. Thus, it is important to examine the creative activities of participatory communities in other parts of the world.

Recent scholarship has found that video memes are largely imitative or cynical. For Dawkins (1989), imitation is central to a meme's survival. According to his formulation, memes propagate when a good idea (or song, phrase, style, etc.) is repeated from person to person. With imitative memetic videos, participants inspired by the source material record and upload their attempts to replicate or build upon the original (Burgess, 2008). Such imitations largely abide by the form and intent of the original, typically out of admiration for the source material or a desire to expand it. On the other hand, cynical or parody memetic videos adopt the original form but change the content and stance to comment upon the original creators, participants, or subject material (Shifman, 2013). For example, in the "Leave Britney Alone" meme, which developed in response to Chris Crocker's impassioned defense of Britney Spears, "user-generated derivatives abandon Crocker's overtly emotional performance in favor of a cynical and ironic one," mocking Crocker, his delivery, and his intent (Shifman, 2013, p. 370). Similarly, Johnson (2013) argues the Antoine Dodson "Bedroom Intruder" meme employs stereotypes of race, class, and sexuality to ridicule Dodson as a Homo Coon. Shifman (2012) found that the videos that inspire the most popular memes are those that are flawed or incomplete in their production or subject matter. She argues, "the ostensibly unfinished, unpolished, amateur-looking and sometimes even weird video invites people to fill in the gaps, address the puzzles or mock their creators" (p. 198). Thus, the textual hooks of memetic videos are often the perceived failings of a video's production or subject that participants play with in their own creations. Although participatory culture as a whole is not unimaginative or derisive, the playfulness of popular memetic videos is often imitative or cynical, intended to copy, parody, or ironically flatter the source material.

Although participatory culture is infused with playfulness, it should not be dismissed as unserious. In fact, participatory play can be subtly and blatantly political. This was evident during the 2008 American presidential campaign when participants remixed political content to invert official campaign rhetoric (Tryon, 2008). Memes also provide opportunities for participants to respond to and challenge institutional controls, as seen with the *Downfall* meme, in which users alter subtitles from the movie *Downfall* to make Hitler react in fury to a variety of unrelated issues (Dias de Silva & Garcia, 2012). When the production company behind *Downfall* issued a take-down order to YouTube, fans of the meme responded by uploading meta-form videos, like "Hitler reacts to the Hitler parodies being removed from YouTube" (Plankhead, 2010). These examples demonstrate that memes can operate as "vernacular instances of satire" that offer social and political critiques (Dias de Silva & Garcia, 2012, p. 109). Thus, participatory culture, like other forms of popular culture, can be a site of struggle in which individuals negotiate identities and vie for power (Dolby, 2006). Even playful activities can represent the political expression of a text's creator and the broader participatory community.

Makmende as Re/Appropriation

Late on March 16, 2010, Just a Band released the video for “Ha-He” on its YouTube channel. The video uses a contemporary style of hand-held camerawork and shallow depth of field, yet the graphics, characters, and storylines are reminiscent of 1970s-era Blaxploitation films. Makmende is the mysterious tough-guy protagonist who appears more comfortable with a sneer than a smile. Like other Blaxploitation characters, Makmende dons an Afro hairstyle, open dress shirt exposing his chest, disco-style pants, and aviator sunglasses. The other male characters are similarly dressed, while the only female—the damsel in distress—wears a natural short hairstyle, large hoop earrings, a headscarf, and tight pants, reminiscent of Blaxploitation icon Pam Grier. “Ha-He” is loaded with other allusions and direct references to global media and cultural products. For example, in one fight scene, the villain gestures to Makmende using the “take-your-best-shot” finger curl first seen in Bruce Lee’s *Way of the Dragon* and revived in *The Matrix*. This scene is shot using multiple camera angles reminiscent of the “Bullet Time” visual effect in *The Matrix*, and afterward Makmende ties a red necktie around his head, drawing parallels to Japanese samurais and cult vigilante Rambo.

Key elements of the Makmende meme also borrow from contemporary global cultural artifacts. Within days of the video’s release, Kenyans began using Twitter and Facebook to circulate jokes about Makmende. Fans launched Makmende.com, Makmende.net, and several Makmende Facebook pages to share and archive Makmende Facts, such as “#makmende can snap his toes” (Marcusolang, 2010), and “Makmende hangs his clothes on a Safaricom³ line to dry” (Zuckerman, 2013). Many of these jokes draw from a formula popularized by the “Chuck Norris Facts” meme, in which the protagonists make the impossible possible. Some Makmende jokes directly replicate existing Norris facts, yet others adopt a similar style and tone but incorporate cultural references and public figures that would resonate most strongly with a Kenyan audience. For instance, the joke “Only Michael Joseph has the permission to write a Please Call Me to Makmende” (“Makmende for president” n.d.) alludes to the former CEO of Safaricom, a well known figure in Kenya, and “Please Call Me” references the popular practice of sending a free SMS message asking someone to call you to avoid spending your phone credit. Thus, the existing cultural form of the “Chuck Norris Fact” was appropriated by Kenyans to assert their own folk hero. Other Makmende jokes use Swahili and the slang language Sheng to further localize the humor. The line “Makmende invented *mpango wa kando* [extramarital affairs]” (Makmended, 2010b) is targeted at Kenyans who would recognize the Swahili phrase as one regularly used in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. Even a joke about the American TV series *Prison Break*, which is popular in Kenya, is presented in Swahili to mark the humor as distinctly Kenyan: “Makmende alitumia shimo ya scotland prison break kurudi prison [Makmende used Scotland’s way out of prison to get in]” (Makmended, 2010a). The language choices and local references indicate that these jokes are intended specifically for a Kenyan audience.

This type of appropriation is evident in other participant creations within the meme. One YouTube user uploaded a Makmende *Downfall* video in which Hitler is furious about Makmende's growing popularity: "*Pia mimi niko na Video noma youtube. Lakini unajuo finally kutasemekana niaje? Watasema ni ya Makmende.* [Even me, I have a cool video on YouTube, but you know what they will ultimately say? They will say the video is Makmende's.]" (BkKaranja, 2010a). The dialogue is in Sheng, mentions a number of well known clubs in Nairobi, and uses popular slang such as "*chips funga*," a *double entendre* for carryout french fries and a promiscuous woman. The video is modeled after an existing meme but is targeted to a Nairobi audience through its local references and culturally specific humor.

Not only do participants in the Makmende meme incorporate local cultural references into their texts, they appropriate global icons to demonstrate the inferiority of these figures in relation to Makmende. This is evident in the Makmende artwork created by the band and fans. Soon after the video's release, images appeared online that featured Makmende as the star of the movie *300*, the face on the 10,000 Kenya shilling note,⁴ and the trademark of a popular Kenyan beer. Further, Just a Band circulated magazine covers of *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *Time* featuring Makmende as "Our Favorite Hero of All Time," "Badass of the Year," and "Man of the Year" (Figure 1).

Rather than select Kenyan publications or continent-wide magazines, the group chose publications with global circulation. By placing Makmende on the cover of *Time*, the group presented Makmende as more than Kenya's "Man of the Year," he is the "Man" for the entire world. Again on *GQ* and *Esquire*, Makmende's masculinity is not situated in comparison to other Kenyans, or other Africans, but to men everywhere. The *GQ* cover is billed as the "Men of the Year Issue," but the only others mentioned are Makmende's shadow, reflection, ego, and "thunderkick." Not only are men around the world positioned as inferior to Makmende, they can't even compete with his likeness. Makmende is depicted as deserving of tremendous awe and as the embodiment of hypermasculinity.



Figure 1. Makmende magazine covers. Courtesy of Just a Band (2010).

Makmende is presented as a symbol of global superiority in fan-created texts as well. For example, the video “Makmende a hero also in europe” (2010), created through the Radiotjänst “Hero” campaign,⁵ shows people all over the world celebrating Makmende as a luminary. His face appears on a photo inside a European’s wallet, a billboard in an African city, and a clipboard floating inside a space shuttle. People cheer and weep at the very image of Makmende, celebrating his global achievements. This video presents Makmende as more than an emerging icon in Kenya; he is situated as an object of admiration by those far removed from Kenya. Another fan-created video presents a teaser trailer for an apocryphal movie, titled “Makmende & The Superheroes Women” (BkKaranja, 2010b). A title sequence opens the trailer: “Makmende is Back! And the superheroes are not happy / Because he took away all their women!” The trailer mixes footage from the music video and clips from recent superhero movies, such as *Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Spider-Man 2*. When the superheroes discover what Makmende has done, they turn and run away in fear: in bubble quotes, the Hulk yells “Fuck!” and Magneto pleads “*Ngai Fafa! Kuwa Mpole!* [Oh my God! Be kind!].” As the characters retreat, their supposed super-heroism is revealed as silliness, with Superman questioning why he only wears underwear and Hulk villain Abomination admitting he farted. By having these characters crumble at the sight of Makmende, the creator appropriates superheroes that have long been icons of nobility and strength and situates them as inferior to Makmende in physical might and sexual prowess.

The meme not only positions Makmende as superior to global pop culture icons, the video “Makmende lands on the Moon: 1968” inverts the history of space exploration (AntoDesigns, 2010). In the video, a computer-animated Makmende rotates the Earth backwards, *à la Superman*, to travel to the year 1968. He then flies to the moon and is the first to plant a flag on the Earth’s satellite (Figure 2). When an American astronaut lands on the moon a year later, he is surprised to discover the Kenya African National Union flag waving triumphantly.

When Makmende plants and salutes his flag, the creator opts not to play the Kenyan national anthem, but rather “*Jambo Bwana* [Hello Mister].” A 1982 pop hit, “*Jambo Bwana*” is the most recognizable Kenyan song outside the country. It is taught to Swahili learners and sung by Kenyans to welcome tourists. The lyrics



Figure 2. Makmende plants the flag in “Makmende lands on the Moon: 1968” (AntoDesigns, 2010).

“*Wageni wakaribishwa. Kenya yetu hakuna matata*. [Visitors are welcomed. In our Kenya, there are no problems]” present Kenya as a inviting land for all, ignoring that many visitors come from former colonial and current neocolonial nations that cause endemic issues for contemporary Kenya. The charming tune masks the ongoing inequalities of neoliberalism, telling the innocent and the culpable alike, “no hard feelings.” But in “Makmende lands on the Moon,” this quaint song is reappropriated to mock the American astronaut. He is welcomed to the moon just as he would be received in Kenya—as a tourist on foreign soil. In doing so, the creator takes a song of submission and reappropriates it as an anthem of triumph and taunting. Kenya has long suffered the consequences of so-called exploration and “flag planting,” and in this video Makmende returns the favor. Official history is “corrected” by stripping the United States of one of its prized achievements and bestowing it to Kenya and its superhero, Makmende.

Still, the most significant reappropriation within the Makmende meme is the very term, *makmende*. In Nairobi in the 1990s, makmende emerged as a schoolyard nickname for someone who incorrectly believed him or herself a hero. It came to represent someone who thought s/he could accomplish something that others knew s/he could not, such as defeat the star of an action movie. The term is an appropriation of Clint Eastwood’s famous line from *Dirty Harry*: “Make my day.” In Sheng the phrase “make my day” became mak-men-de. Other characters in the “Ha-He” video are similarly named after schoolyard nicknames, such as Wrong Number, someone you don’t want to mess with, and First Bodi, the toughest and strongest person around (KenyaCitizenTV, 2010).

When the term makmende first entered the collective consciousness, Kenya was under the harsh rule of President Daniel arap Moi. During Moi’s 24-year presidency (1978–2002), he consolidated power, and corruption became the norm. Most Kenyans had little political agency and the country was often divided (Adar & Munyae, 2001). However in the 1990s, following increased international pressure, Kenya’s media industries began to liberalize, leading to an influx of new television stations. Kenyans experienced the outside world through television and movies *en masse*, and foreign media became popular with Kenyan audiences, particularly youth (Ali, 2009). By 2010, many who grew up with this first wave of international programming had become part of a young, urban, tech-savvy middle class that lives and works in Nairobi. Those who used makmende to tease their friends in primary school were now writing computer programs, learning video production, and participating in the Kenyan blogosphere. In fact, references to Makmende’s re-emergence are central to the meme’s storyline. The opening title of “Ha-He” announces “*Makmende Amerudi* [Makmende has Returned]” and other memetic creations continue this theme. Thus, a group of 20- and 30-something Kenyans familiar with the makmende of their childhood was actively involved in bringing him back through creating and distributing Makmende content online. These Kenyans are cosmopolites who seamlessly engage in both global and local culture, comfortable with the uncertainty of occupying multiple cultural spaces and skilled at moving between different cultural settings and expectations (Chaney, 2002).

In the 1990s, makmende reflected the global inferiority and lack of political efficacy internalized by Kenyans at the time. Youth who saw global heroes flooding their airwaves did not see themselves in those images, nor could they envision local cultural content that could compete in scale and production quality with global television and films. They could not become heroes in Kenya or in the world but, rather, were the wannabe tough guys, who paled in comparison to Bruce Lee, Rambo, and the oppressive Moi regime. By 2010, however, many of these young people had become successful contributors in Nairobi's emerging media, technology and business sectors. These cosmopolites no longer saw themselves as secondary to successful nations, but rather as global contributors and competitors. They embraced their ability to vocalize their political will and criticize political power structures. And, as such, they reappropriated makmende as Makmende, a global competitor capable of achieving the seemingly impossible. The new Makmende could defeat Superman, rewrite history, and circulate global networks as an example of Kenyan innovation. To this generation of cosmopolites, Makmende became a symbol of hope for the nation, both as a local political figure and a global cultural product.

Playful Nationalism

When Makmende returned in 2010, Kenya was undergoing a highly politicized process of constitutional reform. While the country struggled with uniting the divisions exploited during the 2007 general election, the debate leading up to the August constitutional referendum served as an opportunity for politicians to raise their national profiles ahead of the next presidential election. Amid this turmoil, the role and future of Kenyan youth, the *vijana*, emerged as a major political topic (Githongo, 2010). As the constitutional debate grew more divisive and the youth agenda gained momentum, many young Kenyans openly questioned whether prominent political figures were working in the best interest of the nation. Within this context, Makmende's return offered an opportunity for Kenyan citizens, the *wananchi*, to reexamine their country's political and cultural identity.

Embodying a "philosophy of playfulness" (Booth, 2010), Kenyans participating in the Makmende meme engaged in *playful nationalism*, creatively exploring what it means to be Kenyan and what Kenyans desire from their national leaders. Those eager for a new kind of leader who represents the future of Kenya filled in the mysteries of Makmende with their dreams for the nation. This generation of young, urban Kenyans increasingly view political leaders as out-of-touch elites, disciples of ethnic favoritism, and relics of Independence-era politics (Karongo, 2012). Their rejection of the old guard is suggested symbolically in the "Ha-He" video. Makmende, representing Kenyan youth, is tall, slender, and casually dressed, while the villain First Bodi is overweight and clothed in a full suit, signifying the stature and excess of post-Independence African political leaders (Bayart, 1993; Wrong, 2009). During their final battle, Makmende rips off First Bodi's tie and wraps it around his own forehead, symbolically stripping First Bodi of his authority. Moments later, Makmende defeats First Bodi with a thundering fist to the stomach. The

villain's clearest indicator of power becomes his Achilles heel as he crumples to the floor. Makmende uses First Bodi's supposed strengths against him, exposing eating as a weakness and rejecting the symbolic formalism of the necktie for the renegade's headband.

Participant creations further develop Makmende as a playful symbol of the nation. It is Makmende's face on the fictitious 10,000 KSH note—the only note not to feature Kenya's first president—and it is Makmende who plants the Kenyan flag on the moon. A series of videos featuring a computer-animated Makmende close with a "Makmende 2012" title screen, indicating his intentions to join the presidential race. One playwright made this suggestion explicit, penning a play titled "Makmende Vies for President." In the play, young Kenyans enthusiastically support Makmende after he announces his candidacy for "President of the United Tribes of Kenya," an explicit rejection of the divisiveness of many Kenyan politicians who mobilize ethnic cleavages in the service of political goals (Bratton & Kimenyi, 2008). While the old guard tries to derail Makmende's campaign, the candidate's "impregnable Obama-like support, coupled with Makmende's ghostly and superman character" is too much for them to handle (Kenyan Poet, 2010). In an interview, the playwright states that Kenyans are tired of "ceremonial presidents" and yearn for a transformative figure who will unite the country and work in earnest to develop the whole nation (Odari, 2011). For many, Makmende became a symbol of those dreams.

Further, Kenyan cosmopolites used the Makmende meme to discuss reformist visions for the nation. Though many have grown cynical of the potential for true political change, the Makmende meme brought about a moment of reflection on what Kenyans should expect from their leaders. In the months following the video's release, Makmende and what he meant for Kenya became hot topics of conversation on the radio, in coffee shops, and online. Blogger Amkeni Ndugu Zetu (2010) writes that Makmende serves both as a shining example of Kenyan creativity and as a reminder of how Kenyan politicians have failed to live up to the expectations of their people. He argues that, although Makmende is "escapist fantasy," the phenomenon reminds Kenyans that they "must not forever be hostage to the political leaders who hold us down." John Karanja (2010) similarly argues that Makmende demonstrated that Kenyans can break free from the chains of "Old Money and Old Possibilities." For Karanja, the true power lies not in the superheroism of a fictional character but in the extraordinariness of ordinary Kenyans: "Makmende is so powerful, he showed us who we truly are." A writer on the blog Sojourners (2010) agrees that Makmende "represents what many of us hope that our own leaders would." Further, she argues that despite Makmende's flawed hypermasculinity, "he shows us that if we applied ourselves as he does, knowing we are full of error[s] but not focusing on them, we could actually find ourselves becoming better people." Although Kenyans understand the difficult, perhaps unattainable, path to radical political change, they recognize Makmende and the surrounding participatory creations as examples of the significant cultural and technological contributions that can be made by the *wananchi*. This message also resonated with those in the diaspora. One Kenyan

living abroad uploaded a response on YouTube celebrating the possibilities of Kenya's youth:

What makes [the video] so great is what it represents ... It's not CNN coming over to Kenya and filming starving babies and corrupt politicians. No, this is simply some young dot com generation Kenyans doing it right and getting the recognition they deserve. (rickroflcopter, 2010)

These young, urban, tech-savvy Kenyans recognized the political significance of the meme not only because it critiqued Kenya's leadership, but because its existence reflected the creative potential of Kenya's citizens. Makmende fans enjoyed participating in the collective creativity, because it provided an opportunity to imagine a leader who represented their national vision and to celebrate a citizenry who could exercise cultural and technological agency. Thus, the playful nationalism expressed in the meme went beyond humor to become fodder for serious political contemplation and discussion about the future of a country still recovering from the wounds of post-election violence and in the midst of even more political change.

Since Makmende, Kenyans have created other memes to engage playfully in implicit and explicit political commentary. For example, the Twitter meme #SomeoneTellCNN emerged in 2012 in response to international news coverage of Kenya that highlights violence and despotism and often misrepresents on-the-ground reality. Similarly, #TweetLikeAForeignJournalist gained prominence during the 2013 election to mock journalists who came to Kenya expecting election violence. These hashtags gained prominence in the Kenyan Twittersphere and were used to engage in a social and political conversation about issues that have long affected the country. While some tweets offered explicit criticism, many adopted satire to playfully make their points: “#TweetLikeAForeignJournalist Gun shots heard in Nairobi as unruly youth play Call of Duty at full volume” (Björnlund, 2013). Other Twitter memes (e.g. #onekenya and #proudlykenyan) promote national unity and encourage Kenyans to appreciate cultural differences. Just as Makmende represented a non-ethnic Kenyan, these memes also allowed participants to imagine a country that could unite around their Kenyan identity without losing a connection to ethnicity. As Makmende and these examples suggest, participating in the creation and adaptation of memes can be both playful and political. As Fiske argues, “the pleasures of play derive directly from the player's ability to exert control over rules, roles, and representations” (p. 236). This is not to suggest that all uses of new digital technologies should be characterized as political or in service of “development,” but the production and reproduction of popular culture is often entangled with the political (Dolby, 2006).

A Meme of Aspiration

The Makmende phenomenon can be understood as a period of collective reimagining among a group of mostly male, young, urban Kenyans. These cosmopolites took an existing idea—makmende as an insult—and reappropriated it as aspirational. Prior to “Ha-He,” makmende was ethereal; it had never been visually depicted and its time

had passed as culturally relevant. Through the band's decision to resurrect and personify Makmende as an actual tough guy, not a wannabe, Just A Band reimaged and redefined a symbol of weakness into a symbol of strength. The adventures of Makmende remained open, allowing others to participate in the creativity. The "Ha-He" video ends with Makmende walking off into the sunset. Where he went next was up to others to decide: defeating superheroes, rewriting history, and embarrassing Hitler on his way to vying for president. The opportunities are limitless for Makmende, reflecting the optimism of these Kenyan participants who see themselves as global contributors, with much to offer the world. Makmende became their ambassador and advocate in a globalized world.

Through the meme, participants found a canvas on which to express their creativity and visions. They seized the opportunity to imagine their future and to demonstrate their potential to the rest of the world. Unlike the findings of previous research on Internet memes (Burgess, 2008; Shifman, 2012, 2013), the Makmende meme was not cynical or imitative. It was a meme of aspiration, in which participants celebrated the successes of the original video, appropriated its protagonist to inspire creative play, and projected their desires for the nation. Unlike participants in other memes, Makmende creators did not focus on weaknesses in the production, subject material, or star of the video. They recognized that Kenya was at a critical political juncture and used Makmende to explore the political and social aspirations of the *wananchi*, to celebrate the cultural and technological agency of the *vijana*, and to assert Kenya's cultural relevance abroad. As a fictional public figure, Makmende allowed young, urban Kenyans to reimagine a nation traditionally ruled by political elites with a cultural heritage that empowers elders. Although Kenya is in a period of transition in which the youth are speaking out and being heard, these youth have not yet attained political power. But they are exerting power over the cultural and political representations of Kenya. As an open text, Makmende provided an opportunity for young cosmopolites raised on local and global cultural products to vie for control over its meaning.

However, it should be noted that Makmende-inspired dreams for the nation do not represent a progressive vision for all Kenyans. Aspiration is not necessarily inclusive or reformist; it does not always accommodate all people or visions. While Makmende was celebrated by a wide variety of Kenyans, a vision built around Makmende's hypermasculinity devalues women and, worse, can strip them of their agency. In the video and resulting meme, women are almost entirely absent or presented as objects. The only significant female character in the video is depicted first as a damsel in distress, then as Makmende's sexual conquest, and, next, she is forgotten. Other texts within the meme reflect this same hypermasculinity: the magazine covers present Makmende as the extreme patriarchal, hypersexualized man; the superheroes video depicts Makmende stealing women as if they were property; and several jokes exaggerate Makmende's strength and virility at the expense of women. In their eagerness for a stylish vigilante who brought justice, participants left little room for a Kenya grounded in greater gender equity. Thus, while Makmende represents a meme of aspiration, it is limited in its progressivism.

The hypermasculinity associated with Makmende reflects complex Kenyan youth identities that are tied to both cosmopolitan, often liberal views, and values that permeate a traditionally patriarchal society.

Our analysis of the Makmende meme demonstrates that research on participatory culture should situate Global South memes within their cultural contexts. Scholars have recently written about Makmende in discussions of cultural impurity, transnational counter-flow, and structural constraints that restrict counter-flows (Jenkins et al., 2013; Zuckerman, 2013). While such work is valuable, examining Makmende only as a global phenomenon misses out on what the meme signifies within its national context. More important than the appropriation of non-Kenyan content and the circulation of Makmende texts outside of the country was how Kenyans reappropriated markers of cultural inferiority into symbols of strength and initiated a conversation among the *wananchi* about their country's future. From a global perspective, Makmende symbolizes Kenyan creativity and innovation. From a Kenyan perspective, Makmende represents political aspirations and cultural agency. The global perspective overlooks Makmende's role in "pop politics"—popular culture with an implicit or explicit political message and agenda—because it focuses on the impact of the meme's spread beyond Kenya's borders. What is lost is the recognition that the playful nationalism of the Makmende phenomenon is distinct from the traditional development communication paradigm that dominates research about media technology in the African context. As the Makmende meme demonstrates, citizens of the Global South are using the Internet in creative and innovative ways, creating meaning and initiating conversations within borders, while simultaneously producing and re-producing spreadable media that extends beyond borders.

Emphasizing Global North creations and neglecting Global South creations in research can skew typologies and theories about cultural phenomenon like internet memes. The popularity, cynicism, and imitation of memetic videos discussed earlier (Shifman, 2012, 2013; Burgess, 2008) coincide with heavy viewership and participation in the Global North. Yet, in Kenya, the most popular meme to date was far from cynical. Therefore, this study demonstrates that the overrepresentation of internet users in the Global North can bias our understanding of participatory culture in the Global South. Global media theories cannot ignore cultural differences and prominence within the local context but, rather, should seize the rich data afforded by case studies for refining emergent concepts and theories, such as those about internet memes. Analyzing participatory activities within the context of everyday life helps us to understand how people actually use media technologies, not how they *should* or *could* use them, to create social, cultural, and political meaning. In Kenya, Makmende became more than a character in a music video: he became a symbol for and a statement by the nation's youth. After decades in hiding, Makmende made a triumphant return before again disappearing into the sunset. The *vijana*, however, continue to push cultural and technological boundaries and advance a new vision for the nation, one in which they become Kenya's next heroes.

Notes

- [1] While these numbers may appear small relative to popular videos in the U.S., Kenya has one-eighth the population and internet penetration rate of the U.S.
- [2] Two Swahili and Sheng speakers assisted with translating non-English texts.
- [3] Safaricom is the largest mobile phone service provider in Kenya.
- [4] The largest Kenyan currency is the 1,000 shilling note.
- [5] The campaign allowed users to upload a photo of someone who would be inserted into the video.

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