



Published in Nairobi, Kenya
by Royallite Global.

Volume 2, Issue 3, 2021



Article Information

Submitted: 17th July 2021

Accepted: 6th October 2021

Published: 28th November 2021

Additional information is
available at the end of the
article

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ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)

To read the paper
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How to Cite:

Were, M. N. (2021). Online memes in Kenyan social media platforms as a modality of negotiating gender-based violence in androcentric political contexts. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 2(3). Retrieved from <https://www.royalliteglobal.com/advanced-humanities/article/view/691>

Online memes in Kenyan social media platforms as a modality of negotiating gender-based violence in androcentric political contexts

Marciana Nafula Were

Faculty of Education, Tom Mboya University College, Kenya

Email: mnafula85@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3571-1852>

Abstract

This paper examines the re-production of images of gendered political bodies in digital scapes, and how these online forms participate in meaning-making of gender-based violence. The paper reads body images of (wo)men in politics, featured in online memes, as signs embodying society's negotiation of gender-based violence in an androcentric political culture. It finds that both online and offline Kenyan political discourses generated by mainstream and subversive political discourses portray the female body as a subordinate category around which three notions of marginalisation are produced: the trivialised body, the violated body, and the sexualised body, all products of patriarchal and sexist biases. Online memes are of particular interest because they are means by which the current generation of young Kenyans engage in public discourses in ways that reflect ongoing popular discourses on gender in non-official publics.

Keywords: body, gender, memes, popular culture, Rachel Shebesh

Public Interest Statement

This paper examines the re-production of images of gendered political bodies in digital scapes, and how these online forms participate in meaning-making of gender-based violence. The paper reads body images of (wo)men in politics, featured in online memes, as signs embodying society's negotiation of gender-based violence in an androcentric political culture.



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Introduction

The internet has most recently been transformed by Kenyans into a radical political public space, where young people try to make sense of their reality. In this space, individuals belonging to movements like #KOW (Kenyans on Twitter) deconstruct grand political narratives, and in the process, they challenge ideologies through which others are marginalised and controlled. Since mainstream political issues are often discussed in hegemonic spaces like the parliament and media studios where priority is given to established authorities in politics, youths are often sidelined in such discussions. The resultant exclusion of Kenyan youths in these conversations about 'serious' national issues serve as the basis of this paper. Kenyan youths demonstrate their awareness of the power dynamics in Grand National narratives and their counter-discursive rhetoric is simultaneously reproduced in online spaces where their voices thrive, in various forms like memes. Online memes are therefore one means by which dominant political ideologies are contested and this paper argues that the remediation of social constructs on the body of Rachel Shebesh, a Kenyan woman politician, in online memes deconstructs society's expectations and perceptions of women politicians. These subversive images of African women politicians featured in online memes are a modality of agency that challenges the silencing and disfigurement of women considered as rebellious in political discourses within androcentric political cultures. The paper especially examines how memes intertwine with popular forms such as rumours, gossip, and hearsay to become modalities of agency. In androcentric political contexts, these three forms are often used as channels to communicate messages considered improper. The main taboo subject, which forms the subject-matter of memes discussed in this paper, is sexuality which as we will see, legitimizes gender-based violence directed towards the case studied in this paper, Rachel Shebesh.

The Problem: Women in politics, a subversive category

Women politicians are a subversive identity category which extends the imaginaries of normative expectations about women. The concept of women in political leadership as a subversive category is a patriarchal construct that resonates with Judith Butler's observation that some ideas of womanhood are considered "illegitimate" undertakings that though realizable, should only be tolerated, not embraced (2002: viii). By virtue of it being tagged alternative, political womanhood is in effect already and constructed as 'other' and as such, treated differentially. Though this paper does not actively seek to enforce ways of constructing political otherness but to interrogate the social processes through which the other is invented, the two are intertwined. Feminist critics (Lewis, 1999; Hassim, 2015; and Geisler, 2004) note that although African women were appropriated to advance the African nationalist agenda in various struggles for independence, they were side-lined from the post-colonial nation-states and re-imaged within the domestic sphere. What the post-independence state did not bargain for was the backlash from African women whose colonial subjectivity unprecedentedly empowered them to such extents that they would no-longer accept to be confined within the domestic sphere, but contest their expulsion from the state and their allocation of lower citizenship status compared to men. Mikell (1997:2) observes that: "African women know that African male politicians feel pressured to rewrite political agendas to encourage pluralism and to include their interests in the public dialogue but that men

detest this ‘pressure to “democratize” and open up public participation to women” arguing that these external influences produce un-African experiences and gender roles. Mikell’s observation is key in explaining the backlash in the form of an upsurge of violence against women in political public sphere, the violation of women’s rights within the nation, and notions of femininity that presuppose women as subject to male dominance.

The political space in Kenya is largely androcentric. The problem is that the extant normative discursive practices, in upholding hegemonic and dominant cultures, judge women on the basis of patriarchal expectations and overlook how women in politics defy their homogenisation. The paper is centred on the political experience of Rachel Shebesh, the former Woman Representative of Nairobi County, and current Chief Administrative Secretary in the Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender who has since 2013 been at the center of controversy for allegedly being a victim of physical attacks from both male and female political figures, and an alleged perpetrator of assault against male politicians. In 2013, it was reported that she had become a victim of abuse by the then County Governor Evans Kidero, who is said to have slapped her following an altercation in his office. The saga quickly attracted the attention of online users who created a series of memes around this violent act, and this discourse went viral. The saga quickly became a hot topic in the internet space under the popular hashtag #The Gubernatorial Slap and quickly transformed into another discourse, namely: Governor Evans Kidero’s historical slap. The paper does not seek to verify whether or not the slap actually happened, which was the focus of memetic fans and the Kenyan public in general at that time. Rather, it analyses the reproduction of this act of gender-based violence in Kenyan popular discourses and how in trying to make meaning of this attack, Kenyan youths reconstruct a biography of this female politician and Kenyan political womanhood. The reason for this focus is that Shebesh’s experience has become a “sexual rhetoric” converted into a truth-meter of female political leadership in Kenya.

Theory and method: On memes and their cultural significance

This paper is part of a larger project that explores representations of African women politicians in different public spaces. The current paper examines the reproduction of body images of African women in popular online media and conversely male political figures as a way to interrogate mechanisms through which gender-based violence within the political arena is normalized in the political public sphere. Framed within the context of an androcentric political culture, the paper engages online memes as a creative and exploratory way of learning from youth-preferred publics. Tapping into memes as a cultural repertoire enabled the researcher to understand how Kenyan youths conceptualise the structural causes of power imbalances that breed gender-based violence within the Kenyan political sphere.

The concept meme, coined in 1976 by the biologist Richard Dawkins, forms the basis of data in this paper. A meme is a text produced through replication of cultural concepts (Shifman, 2014; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Blackmore, 1999; Brodie, 1996; and Downes, 1999). In Kenya’s contemporary culture today, memes are synonymous with digitalization and they predominantly engage with popular social themes, an aspect that is reminiscent in Knobel and Lankshear’s definition of memes as “a popular term for describing “catchy” and widely propagated ideas or phenomena” (201). Regardless the seriousness or lack thereof that has characterised the reception

of memes in academic circles, it is undeniable that memes are texts that open up opportunities for “perceiving mindsets, new forms of power and social processes, new forms of social participation and activism, and new distributed networks of communication and relationship—among other social phenomena” (Blackmore, 1999 and Brodie, 1996). A commonality that cuts across the views of scholars on memetics is that memes thrive on cultural “replication” (Dawkins, 1999: xvi), mostly through “copying or imitation” (Shifman, 2014:2). As literary forms, therefore, memes are structurally intertextual, and it is this dialogism that informs how their publics understand them. Apart from intertextuality, memes encompass other artistic attributes like “parodies, remixes, or mashups” that though individually stylized (Shifman, 2014:2), they still “shape and reflect general social mindsets” (Shifman, 2014:4). This dialogic quality of memes reputes the possibility of memes designating generalizable meanings.

While traditionally memes were offline cultural forms, currently there is a sub-genre regarded as online memes, which Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (2007) view as contemporary popularized reconfigurations of traditional understandings of memes. Online memes have been defined by Limor Shifman as a concept describing “the propagation of items such as jokes, rumors, videos, and websites from person to person via the Internet” (2014:2). Despite the lukewarm acceptance of online memes as worthy of academic notice (Shifman, 2014; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007), the fact that internet popular memes have a remarkably short shelf-life as they tend to address popular temporalised subjects should be taken as an indicator of the peripheral placement of non-nationalist political agenda like gender-based violence in Kenyan political discourses. The greatest challenge this temporality of online memes presents to this research is the inability to source these texts at will at a later date as they have a tendency to disappear from online reservoirs after a short period. Since internet memes have a short life-span, their cultural influence is also short-lived, though profound. Another aspect of online memes that perhaps contributes to their being treated with suspicion is that by lacking “physical neural presence” (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007: 201), online memes have no distinguishable authors and it is at times difficult to ascertain the identity of the creator. This presents a problem when using them as textual referents.

Although the authorship and shelf-life of internet memes present challenges for scholars interested in studying them, they should not by any means be disregarded as literary forms. In the same vein, Knobel and Lankshear view “memes as recognizable, bounded phenomena that have material effects in the world and that can be scrutinized” (201). Online memes bear the three main characteristics of successful memes described by Dawkins as: “fidelity, fecundity, and longevity” (qtd. in Knobel and Lankshear, 2007: 201). For Dawkins, fidelity designates presence of aspects that can be replicated and “passed from mind to mind relatively intact” (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007:201). Here, fidelity refers to the ability of memes to capitalize on allusions so that the audience can intuitively decipher associated meanings (Blackmore, 1999: 57). Secondly, fecundity refers to the reproductive potential of an idea or pattern; its ability to capture audiences’ attention to the extent that it can be replicated and distributed (Brodie 1996, 38). This means an idea or pattern has to be susceptible to the public (Brodie 1996, Vajik 1989). Susceptibility here refers to the popularity of cultural, historical and social circumstances that will make the public inclined towards a meme, as well as “the interests and values of the people using the spaces in which the meme is unleashed” (Bennahum 1998). Thirdly, longevity is a condition of memes that

designate their shelf-life. The longer a meme survives the more it can be copied and passed on to fresh minds, thereby ensuring its ongoing transmission; it ensures there are “optimal conditions for a meme’s replication and innovation” (202).

A major challenge in this study is that while traditional memes have longevity, their internet counterparts studied here do not (Shifman, 2014; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007). The discourses of the memes discussed in this paper are by nature trending conversations at a particular time in the history of Kenya, hence they appear and then disappear so fast from the public, leaving no significant footprints (links, traces) for future analysis. For Knobel and Lankshear, internet memes have no longevity because “the internet has not been around long enough for any kind of evolutionary longevity to have been established” (202). Knobel and Lankshear observe that in internet circles the word “‘meme’ is a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language ‘move,’ or some other unit of cultural ‘stuff’” (202).

Another key challenge of the texts under study is that popular media are prone to questions regarding their legitimacy especially since in highly politically-charged contexts, propaganda in the form of myths and misinformation intensify, fueled by uncertainty that characterizes the period. Thus, while this article’s methodology is innovative and captures real time experiences in the Kenyan socio-political sphere, it is constrained by fast-(dis)appearing, mythical, rumour- and innuendo- loaded social media messages that are often disregarded by a majority of Kenyans.

The innovative idea: Political significance of online memes on Political Womanhood

In response to the marginalisation of gender issues and youth voices in nationalist political discourses, this paper examines creation and dissemination of online memes by youths as interventions that constitute knowledge production on violence against Kenyan women politicians. The popular knowledge in memes subverts and re-invents normative discourse that regulate; how individuals come to “know” about women politicians, how bodies of these women come to be known, and how certain knowledge about African political womanhood gains authority over others. Towards this end, this paper engages in ongoing memetic discourses to suggest that the creative process and distribution of memes on Rachel Shebesh and the politics surrounding them spread and participate in cultural production of popular discourses that would otherwise be ignored in official political discourses. The argument is that online memes facilitate the remaking of bodies of women politicians in ways that foreground and deconstruct patriarchal discourses on women that normalize gender-based violence.

Overview of Findings:

The main assumption guiding the debate in this paper is that in portraying the female body, the male body is implicated and vice versa. The findings in this study are therefore organised into two main themes. First is a comparative analysis of offline and New Media (Facebook and twitter) texts that reproduce normative conceptions of femininity. This first part is then followed by as analysis of memes that contest patriarchy’s conventional expectations of gendered political (wo)manhood. The images and comments on social media and online platforms that re-tell the story of the slap and the gender discourses around it reveal different attitudes displayed by the

Kenyan society towards the gendered political body. The main focus is the reproduction of the female body around three notions of marginalisation: the trivialised body, the violated body, and the sexualised body, all products of patriarchal and sexist biases. In focusing on memes on the 'Gubernatorial Slap', therefore, all probing problematic concepts like: the female body as a sexualised object, and the non-normative female body as grotesque, are more nuanced forms of gender-based violence in cyberspace.

Normalization of gender-based violence in offline and new media

The former Nairobi County Women's Representative Rachel Shebesh is one of the most scandalised and visible female political personalities in Kenyan social media. It should be noted that the Woman Representative is one of the political positions created under the 2010 constitution of Kenya as a measure to achieve Affirmative Action in the political sphere. Articles 81(b) and 27(8) of the Constitution of Kenya and the Affirmative Action bill recommend that one-third gender principle be observed in political practices as a measure to ensure the inclusion of women in politics. The paper establishes that while the Women's Seat -a special parliamentary seat reserved for women in each of the forty-seven counties in accordance with the one-third gender principle has increased the number of female parliamentarians in the National Assembly, it has not successfully engendered the society to visualise women politicians as deserving the dignity accorded to male politicians. In fact, patriarchal ideologies operating within the private sphere have been simply transposed into the political sphere. For instance, public discourses on Shebesh that portray her as sexually deviant for allegedly being promiscuous and violent reincarnating stereotypical archetypes about women such as Eve or Scarlet, and popular discourses on Kikuyu women as violent. That these discourses are reproduced in online platforms shows how the cyber-space is continually evolving as a space where political discourses are re-contextualised.

To elaborate on how the re-making of the female body is achieved, this article focuses on the representations of Rachel Shebesh in different media platforms, both online and offline. Shebesh is arguably one of the most controversial female political personalities in Kenya. According to rumours in public discourse in the cyber-space, Hon. Shebesh has been the recipient of violent attacks from both male and female political figures, the most recent and high-profile scandal involving the former County Governor Evans Kidero, who was said to have slapped her after an altercation in his office. While Kidero denied these charges, evidence from video footage recorded by the media and available on You-Tube suggested that there was a high probability that he slapped her¹. The cyber-space is therefore limited in terms of its reliability to depict total reality. Thus, Governor Kidero's denial of slapping Shebesh cannot be proven beyond reasonable doubt. Later, Governor Kidero revised his statement in the public domain, stating that Shebesh had first hit him below the belt and his reaction, which he is not clear about, was in defence of his masculinity. Since neither the You-Tube video nor television cameras show Shebesh touching Kidero, the latter's claims remain true until proven otherwise, rendering his statement uncontestable. The ambiguities over such incidents of violence against women politicians are indicative of the androcentric political culture in Kenya, which either fosters silence or trivialization and mockery over instances of gender-based violence that find expression in public spaces. This was evident in the manner in which the gubernatorial slap saga was advanced in the Senate, as

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGL2rSNgsNQ>

Sen. (Prof.) Anyang'-Nyong'o: Madam Temporary Speaker, I agree with the Senator who has just spoken that we need to solve the problems, and I think I am going to try to be part of the solution. But, first, let me try and correct Sen. Murungi. I think populism just came to an end in Latin America with the passing on of Hugo Chavez.

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Latin American Governments are now very reformist, very neo-liberal and I think populism has moved more to Africa than anywhere else.

After having said that, Madam Temporary Speaker, I agree with our colleague Senators that we need to invest in our children---

The Temporary Speaker (Sen. Ongoro): Just a minute, Sen. (Prof.) Anyang'-Nyong'o. What is out of order, Sen. Mbuvi?

Sen. Mbuvi: Madam Temporary Speaker, can the Senator repeat himself? I have heard him saying "Rachel Shebesh;" I do not know---

(Laughter)

The Temporary Speaker (Sen. Ongoro): Sen. (Prof.) Anyang'-Nyong'o, did you, by any means, mention the name of hon. Shebesh to the annoyance of Sen. Mbuvi?

Sen. (Prof.) Anyang'-Nyong'o: No, no, no, Madam Temporary Speaker. I said 'Hugo Chavez,' not "Rachel Shebesh"!

Figure 1: Senate invocation of Shebesh and Mbuvi's Sexuality

The reactions of the Members of the Senate towards senator Mbuvi's statement might seem a little out of place in the senate, but in order to understand the intertextuality inherent in the parody surrounding what appeared as a humorous statement, one has to delve into Kenyan popular discourses often regarded as rumours and gossip. Rumours are therefore an informal source of information, what Musila (2016) calls 'social truth' and like gossip, they are channels through which individuals on the periphery of official politics circulate information. While Tamale (1999) associates gossip with rural women, Musila (2016) de-genders and de-spatialises rumours and considers these practices substitute sources of reliable information in cases where the state has control over what the media publishes and broadcasts. In Kenya, New Media platforms of Facebook and Twitter are spaces where such social truths are debated. The two sites are considerably two of the most proactive sites where Kenyan youths speculated on Shebesh's sexuality and exposure to violence. The following posts present comments relating to a rumour circulating on social media platforms that the Woman's Representative, Shebesh, was pregnant:



Figure 2: Facebook responses to claims that Rachel Shebesh was pregnant

The most outstanding comment from the Facebook excerpt above is by Geoffrey Opiyo, and it begs the question, who does the baby really belong to? He says: is it sonko's or the luhya man's [i.e. Shebesh's husband]? senator junior [suggesting that the baby is the senator's baby, hence senator junior], the luhya man is a toy boy, kidero slap made you realise that you are a woman and you thought of enlarging your family, hope you will change your attitude and behavior as you welcome your new-born. The same discourse was also being unpacked in Twitter as shown below:



Figure 3: Tweets about Shebesh and Sonko's alleged sexual exploits

When the debates in the two social media platforms are advanced in the senate, and considering the reaction of both male and female senators to this matter, this discourse of female sexuality operates as a framework which suggests that the one-third gender principle is a failure. The members' reaction to the alleged Shebesh-Mbuvi affair suggests that they considered this a 'private matter' and their laughter a mockery of their mandate to uphold house business in a sacrosanct manner. The invocation of Shebesh's name therefore reflects a low opinion about women politicians like Shebesh who are perceived as a reincarnation of the scarlet archetype, women who lure men to distraction with their sexuality. Thus their trivialization of this topic as they conducted house business in Parliament is a demonstration of the tenacious position that African women politicians occupy in parliament. The violence against Shebesh has been trivialised and equated to a 'domestic affair' by attaching a sexual angle to it. Of interest is the reticence in the Kenyan women's movement to come out in defense of the Nairobi woman's representative. The following day after the alleged attack, the response from women activists was very shocking. Apart from the Coalition of Violence Against Women, COVAW, which also exhibited caution when dealing with the matter, not much else was witnessed in terms of mass demonstration. Instead, a group of demonstrators camped outside the County governor's offices in support of the governor,

calling for Shebesh to act like a respectful woman.

Evidently, therefore, the different publics' treatment of the sexuality of a female parliamentarian suggest that the physical violation of Shebesh's was necessary as a disciplinary measure for projecting her sexuality contrary to patriarchal expectations. Consider the following Facebook post:

DismasOduorNg'oda spare the slap, spoil the girl. child, kidero babayao.....ebu play [#alakazim](#) by [#facesvoicebox](#)

This rhetoric of punishment for transgressing patriarchal expectations is revisited in detail in various excerpts from Facebook and Twitter, example of which is detailed below. Evidently, the debates advanced in the preceding section shows a consensus among Kenyans in different publics who uphold androcentricism and exert these expectations in the political culture that the punishment of Shebesh was a necessary evil. However, there was also a recognition that Governor Kidero might have angered Kenyan female voters who might not vote for him in the impending elections. Interestingly, some media houses picked up such nuances as was evident in the following excerpt from the Facebook page of the Kenya Television Network, KTN:

October 17, 2013. After the infamous 'Gubernatorial Slap', what should [#Kidero](#) do to win women back? <http://bitly.com/1gmBXpD> [#Shebesh](#)

Humble Chaste He lost no woman bt lost some [#temper](#) necessarily. Shebesh ni kiz cha ku loose? Kama her husband haoni hasara, why wld u expect Kidero 2 be worried?He slapped Shebesh [#NOT](#) women! What about u ask, «after sleeping with sonko from lodges 2 electronics/ social

Humble Chaste Mwanamke hana haya anazini 2 waziwazi. She's a disgrace 2 our genda

Elizabeth Makori The women understood his slap...Shebesh asked for it.

Pablo El CheEskobar KTN Seems you dont have any news which women came to you and reported that they had stopped supporting Kidero? infact most women on twitter and blogs were for that slap.Can you please setup cameras on the streets and find some news and stop dwelling non issues

KunguDomnicWuodAwasi Magnificent comment Mr.Humble. Lovely! That straight away shows how brilliant u are. You've rounded off everything. The damage Shebesh has caused to her family is much more humiliating than Kidero's slap. Kidero has therefore lost nothing.

LivingtestimoniaYulempendwa even me i have felt the strength of a woman in your comments and thats why people are mistaking you to be a man!! thats commendable! Not only do the responses to this media house's Facebook page suggest a rampant androcentricism that pervades the Kenyan political space which women are also complicit to, but the nature of the question posed also demonstrates blindness to the peripheral position accorded to women in the Kenyan political sphere.

Contesting gender-based violence through online memes

This section examines the portrayal of women politicians in online memes and how the Kenyan public responds to these representations. The debate in this section is centred on how the

embodiment of Rachel Shebesh's body through the prostitute metaphor in media and cyberspace is translated into the public's criticism and dismissal of her political agenda as Nairobi County's Woman Representative, and how she negotiates this metaphor to re-invent herself and survive the androcentric political culture. The representation of Shebesh through the prostitute metaphor in the form of online memes began in 2013, when photos appeared in various websites on the internet suggesting that Shebesh was involved in an extra-marital affair with the current Nairobi County Senator, Mike Mbuvi popularly known as 'Sonko'. However, the two denied these allegations and disqualified the rumours and associated images as computer-generated photos meant to discredit their political bond as members of the same party. The depiction of Shebesh's sexuality not only punctured her political image, but her sexuality was used to justify her exposure to violence. For example, one photo appearing on the internet featured below shows a photo-shopped image of Shebesh pointing a gun at Sonko, re-telling the public's speculation about a rumour that Sonko and Shebesh were involved in a physical tussle at a hotel in the outskirts of Nairobi, after which Sonko claimed that Shebesh had assaulted her.



Photo 1: Shebesh in a tussle with Sonko, the second male politician said to have beaten her in public

Evidently, the prostitute metaphor apparent in the public discourses circulating in different social media platforms highlighted in the previous section is also reminiscent in online memes as the one that follows:



Photo 2: A mosaic of images of different musicians identifying Shebesh as the biggest prostitute in Kenya.

The popular nature of the meme featured above can be deduced from the presence of male celebrity figures like the American pop star Michael Jackson (top left), American rappers like 50-Cent (top right), Kanye West (bottom right), Tupac (bottom centre), and Kenyan Gengetone rapper Jua Cali (bottom left). One problem that emerges from this type of imaginary is the undertones they generate insofar as functioning as a basis for legalising gender-based violence directed at Shebesh. As noted earlier, it was rumoured that Shebesh had been a victim of assaults by various male politicians including Governor Kidero, Senator Mbuvi, and the former male parliamentarian Ferdinand Waititu and the discourse of violence between Shebesh and Waititu is portrayed in photo 3 below:



Photo 3: Shebesh in a boxing match with Ferdinand Waititu, the third male politician rumoured to have physically assaulted her in public

The narratives in social media about Shebesh's encounters with gender-based violence metaphorically re-visit the myth that Kikuyu women are not only domineering, but emasculate men by physically assaulting them. The photo above is a stereotypical representation of this myth, and debates trending news in social media suggest that Shebesh has emasculated her husband. The resultant narrative about Shebesh repressing her husband's power as head of the household, also intoned in the Facebook and Twitter excerpts featured in the previous section is a reflection of the patriarchal ideology that women should be submissive to their husbands. Contrary to the normative expectation, Shebesh's public visibility, coupled with the power obtained from her political participation, have seen the public turn her into a monster with an unquenchable lust and her strength depicted as a threat to men's masculinity. These stories however contribute to the meta-narrative that African female political womanhood should be patronised to protect political masculinities. To reclaim this masculinity, Kidero and Shebesh are transposed into the cave-man days and Kidero is re-signified as a macho man with unlimited strength and control that exerts total dominance over the women as follows:



Photo 4: The above photo is a reproduction of the faiba advert which promotes faiba as the fastest internet option in Kenya. In this meme, Shebesh is left mesmerised by the speed and strength of the slap she received from Kidero

The Rachel Shebesh slap saga has so many silences. For example, in the video clip whose link is provided², Shebesh is heard yelling, ‘Kidero you have slapped me?’ Yet, Kidero first consistently denied ever slapping her and later claimed that he could not remember slapping anyone. Due to the many silences surrounding this saga, the stories associated with this event have come to be referred to as moshene (gossip) and most of these categorized as rumour.

This incident inspired many Kenyans to construct a public discourse that focuses on her sexuality. The saga has become a meme and her slapping been now termed as Governor Evans Kidero’s historical slap. The sub-texts are in the form of ‘funny’ photos that read in unison reconstruct a visual archive of the state of the political sphere in Kenya and women’s place in it. The story has come to be referred to as moshene (gossip) and most of these categorized as rumour. Details of her private life and sex escapades are embellished to justify the violence against her and this discourse spread through gossip, often presented as reliable information garnered from heresay as told and re-told by Shebesh’s closest allies. These blind-spots in terms of truth-verification are confronted through the memes featured below. Although the cyber-space limits the framing of this event, it also opens up limitless possibilities for re-inventing the conceptions of the female self in public social platforms through photographic alterations. For instance, the tone of memes featured in this paper and constructed around the discourse of the historical slap depict Shebesh as a woman who has been justifiably punished for her temerity and audacity to challenge the dominance of Kenyan male politicians. Below are some of the memes that carry this undertone of stupefaction:



Photo 5

In Photo 5 above, Kidero appears to have slapped Shebesh, and the speed with which the slap is effected has left Shebesh in shock and awe over the power that Kidero possesses.



2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGL2rSNgsNQ>

In the photo above, the shock of the incident is given an international audience, an element that presents a criticism of the violence that Shebesh was subjected to. In this photo, the former President of American Barrack Obama is telling his Vice-President Joe Biden to forget about Syria because the rumour about Kidero is trending and more ‘juicy’. Unsurprising is the unapologetic nature of memes generated by the proponents and followers of androcentric politics as evident in the memes below:



Photo 6: Trans. Welcome Shebesh, do you want juice or coffee?



Photo 7: Trans. I asked her if she wants juice or coffee, she said coffee –insinuating that Shebesh asked for the slap



Photo 8: Trans. I have given Shebesh 16% VAT, I mean Violence added Tax. I have not beaten her.

There are also other images that valorise and amplify political masculinity, and the most prominent strategy is the foregrounding and ridiculing of Shebesh’s hair. In Photo 9 below, the physical

assault on Shebesh is trivialised by the caption appearing in the photo that says. ‘I saw a spider in that weave of hers and I hit it with all my strength’. The spider metaphor alludes to her sexuality, which is portrayed as a spider’s web to attract unassuming men. Kidero is hence re-invented as a comic-hero who rescues men from entrapment by Shebesh the spider, who wears her hair in a seductive manner that drives men to their destruction.



Photo 9: I saw a spider in that weave of hers and I hit it with all my strength

The hero qualities embodied in Kidero’s body are accentuated in photo 10 that follows, in which Kidero is portrayed as an acutely aware man, who unlike most men, is not ignorant about Shebesh’s sexual weapons. This photo shows a lack of remorse towards the victimised female politician, as well as a casual disregard for violence against women. This androcentric attitude, and the silence that the Kenyan public displayed towards this contravening of the Affirmative Action Bill, reflects Kenyan society’s silent acquiescence with the disciplining of this “rebellious” woman.



Photo 10: ... and if you mess with my balls, I will slap you ... again

While smiling at Shebesh following their reconciliation, his thought-processes are revealed, and he is seen as contemplating in his mind, silently telling Shebesh that ‘... if you mess with my

balls, I will slap you again'. This last statement attests to the debate being made in this paper that representations of women's bodies reflect the assumed dominance of men over women's bodies and in representing the woman, man is implicated. The gubernatorial slap is therefore a demonstration of patriarchy's concerted effort to curb the emasculation of male politicians and this is the underlying narrative in the rumour mill about Shebesh within the Kenyan public sphere.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper has examined how representations of bodies of African (fe)male politicians in different media such as newspapers, social media sites like Facebook, twitter, and online memes navigate issues of sexuality and gender-based violence. The paper found out that in most public discourses, bodies of women politicians who perform their identities in opposition to conventional expectations based on Christian morality and traditional conceptions of womanhood are viewed as rebellious, hence dis-figured through technological enhancements or re-contextualisation as memes and presented as grotesque. These bodies are also narrated as immoral, and measures taken to discipline them by castigating their femininity and degrading them as prostitutes, or children. The paper establishes that women politicians whose bodies are dis-figured are those that have contested their dis-location from society.

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