



The “Freedom Fighter” Bobi Wine

**A VIDEO ANALYSIS OF POPULIST
PERFORMANCE IN UGANDA**

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APRIL 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Sara Weschler for her useful insights and constructive input. I also would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for critically reading and commenting on earlier versions of this paper and Julian Kuttig for giving me the impulse to publish it.

This paper is published by the Governance in Conflict Network (GIC)

www.gicnetwork.be

Coordinator: Tomas van Acker

Designer: Marie Wynants, achttien.eu

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Abstract

This article examines the use of populist performance as a political strategy, by the Ugandan opposition leader Bobi Wine, through a video analysis of his campaign events, music videos, and speeches. By identifying the key recurring elements in his strategy, it is demonstrated how populism is manifested through performance. It is moreover examined how these elements are articulated through the use of performative tools and how the leader relates them strategically to the Ugandan context. Using the case of Wine as an example, it is thereby shown how populism can be conceptualized as performance against the background of popular culture and politics in Uganda and Africa more generally. The paper thereby contributes to theoretical discussions of populism and its forms in different places. On the basis of Wine's use of popular culture, the paper argues for a contextualized conceptualization of populism as performance. This perspective is found to overcome the conceptual problem of assigning populism to a normative or political classification and more broadly underlines the need to contextualize performative populism, so that it functions as an analytical lens.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	9
DEFINING POPULISM AS PERFORMANCE	12
Popular culture, media and politics in postcolonial East Africa	13
Analytical framework: populist performance	16
RESEARCH CONTEXT: MUSIC INDUSTRY AND UGANDAN POLITICS	18
METHODOLOGY	20
ANALYSIS: BOBI WINE'S POPULIST PERFORMANCE	23
The freedom fighter	23
Uniting the people of Uganda	27
The generational divide	29
Performance skills: creating a stage and generating moods	30
CONCLUSION	33
REFERENCES	35

Introduction

Uganda's January 2021 presidential elections introduced a new opposition candidate to the current head of state Yoweri Museveni, who had been in power for 35 years. Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, also known by his stage name, Bobi Wine, challenged Museveni not only as a politician but also in his music videos and songs, in which he tackles social injustices and criticizes the president's long-time hold on power.

Wine's engagement in politics is, however, not recent. He participated in local politics and stood as a candidate in the 2017 by-elections in Kyadondo East Constituency, where he won over candidates from Museveni's ruling party (Muzee and Enaifoghe 2020: 196). But the singer and entertainer also addressed political grievances in his songs, long before running as a presidential candidate. To run against Museveni, he founded the People Power Movement and later organized the National Unity Platform (NUP) party. Nevertheless, Wine was said to have gained only 34.1 percent of the votes in last year's elections (Abrahamsen and Bareebe 2021: 102). Yet, these are explained as fraud, due to irregularities, the absence of independent election observers, and the general oppression of the opposition campaigns (ibid.).

Interestingly, Wine and his movement have been labelled "populist" by different sources (Nyombi 2019). While his political message has been labelled "generational populism" from an academic perspective (Melchiorre 2021), Museveni accused Wine in normative terms of being populist and a musician rather than a politician (Apollo 2021; Hilsum 2021).

According to Mutsvairo and Salgado (2021: 341), rather than just labelling different African leaders as populist, it is useful to identify key characteristics of populist strategies and how they are used to mobilize support, to develop a comprehensive analysis of how populism plays out in a specific context. This paper, therefore, takes up this point and argues that in the case of Wine, populism takes shape in the form of performance. Therefore, the following analysis draws on video material of the candidate's election campaigns, speeches, music, concerts and shows. The material is examined through an analytical framework of populist performance, developed in the theoretical section, to take into account the background of popular culture and politics in the country.

Thus, in the case of Uganda, the overlap of the entertainment industry and politics is especially visible in the rise of Wine's People Power Movement (Kiwuwa 2019: 25). With reference to Wine, music is described as "a tool for political propaganda and support" (ibid.). In line with this, it is commented that although "much of [Wine's] activism took place on the streets of Kampala or the Parliament floor, a great deal also unfolded *on stage*" (Anonymous 2019: 1, own emphasis added). Especially concerning young voters, Wine himself declares: "We [the People Power Party] have a following and music is (how) we get in touch with the people" (Wine in: Jennings 2019).

Although the literature on popular culture and politics in African countries is broad and populism in the form of "movements" similar to Wine's are underlined as new dynamics in African politics (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021; Nyairo and Ogude 2005; Künzler and Reuster-Jahn 2012; Englert 2008a), there is still scant literature dealing with the concept of populist performance in Africa. At the same time, the vast body of literature debating the characteristics that define populism lacks contextualized discussions of populism as performance (Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2004; Pappas 2016). Consequently, this article aims to contribute on a theoretical level to the definitions of populism, by offering a conceptualization of populism as performance and the way performative populism plays out in the particular context of Uganda. Wine's political strategy serves therefore as an example of how populism can be explained as performance.

The paper is divided into five sections, starting with the introduction. The following theoretical part carves out the elements of the concept of populist performance, which serve as guidelines for the analytical framework and contextualizes the meaning of the concept of performance and populism against an African background. Next, the research context in Uganda is briefly outlined, followed by an explanation of the methodology for the analysis. The analysis is divided into four parts, according to the most dominant populist elements of Wine's performance. The article closes with a conclusion, highlighting the usefulness of a conceptualization of populism as performance for the analysis of African politics.

Defining populism as performance

Populism has been on the rise in recent years, not only as a political phenomenon but also as a concept in academia, journalism, and media (Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2004: 541). At the same time, there seems to be no single coherent concept in literature which provides a definition of what populism constitutes (Pappas 2016). A narrow consensus exists that populism can take various forms and has different meanings and consequences relative to its context (Pappas 2016: 6; Resnick 2015: 317). The aim of this section is not to provide a full overview of the term's debate, but rather point out that populism needs to be contextualized, to function as a clear analytical framework for populist performance (Pappas 2016: 6).

Thus populism in an East African context might differ from its meaning in Latin America or Europe (Resnick 2015; Resnick 2017; Pappas 2016: 6). In this regard, an analytical focus on depersonalized institutions and political practices is criticized as a “Western” lens and thereby as “exclusion of what is there” (Strauss and O’Brien 2007: 2). Instead, by regarding performance as an important part and tool of populism, this paper carves out “what so often *is* present ...: the politics of affect, emotion, and drama” (ibid.: 2). This article, therefore, argues for the usefulness of a perspective that identifies populism as acted out through performance, and presents Uganda as an example where populist performance plays a role for political mobilization.

The focus on styles and performances in politics is described as helpful for the analysis of contemporary forms of populism, as it “stresses embodied, symbolically mediated performance as a central element for understanding ...

contemporary political phenomena” (Moffitt 2016: 4f.). In this regard, Benjamin Moffitt (ibid.: 38) highlights the advantage of seeing populism as performance in going beyond a rhetorical analysis including the broader aesthetic performance. According to Moffitt (ibid.: 43), this conceptualization further allows avoiding a strict binary of non-populist and populist or assigning populism to left or right on a political spectrum. Thus the danger of implicit normative views in the categorization of populism is avoided (Moffitt 2016: 44; Pappas 2016: 10), as populist performance is regarded as a political tool rather than specific political content. From this perspective, populist performance can be viewed in relation to the context on the ground.

Popular culture, media and politics in postcolonial East Africa

The focus on performance seems furthermore fruitful for this analysis in light of the various linkages between performance and politics that are found in many African countries. In the case of Tanzania or Kenya, for example, music and cultural politics are analyzed as parts of the performance of the country as a nation (Askew 2002; Englert 2008a: 11f.). Especially popular music is found to play an important role in the politics of many African countries, to mobilize support, criticize and motivate political participation (Künzler and Reuster-Jahn 2012; Englert 2008a; Nyairo and Ogude 2005; Reuster-Jahn 2008). Parallels can be found between Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo where the music industry and actual politics influence each other (Englert 2008b; Englert 2008a; Schneidermann 2020; White 2008). What is common in this relationship is the use of popular music and concerts for party campaign rallies to mobilize support (Englert 2008a: 12; Schneidermann 2020; Reuster-Jahn 2008) but also the adaption of music production and song lyrics to gain political influence or support from the elites (White 2008; Reuster-Jahn 2008). In Tanzania, for example, the emergence of young politicians challenging the “old” system is related to the dynamic of young musicians and their music genres getting popular amongst Tanzanian youth (Englert 2008b). In Kenya, the song “Unbwogable” by the popular hip-hop duo Gidi Gidi Maji became an expression of freedom against the political elite and after censorship influenced the 2002 general elections (Nyairo and Ogude 2005). Not only in national politics but also on the local level, music, performance and the linkages to popular musicians

are analyzed as decisive influence factors for political mobilization. Danson Kahyana (2021) shows how candidates' connections to the People Power Movement and the use of Wine's music defined the outcome of student council elections at the two major universities in Kampala. Moreover, social media and popular culture seem to offer more possibilities for opposition leaders, as their access to traditional media is limited in most African countries by long-time leaders (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021, 342).

Performing populism by using music and popular culture also seems to present a "different tactic" (ibid.) to former types of populism in African countries. While the "first generation of populism" in Africa in the 1980s is associated mostly with anti-colonial politics, current manifestations of populism are regarded as a differentiation strategy to counter oppressive regimes (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021: 341; Resnick 2017: 104). These "new" forms of populism emerge not through personalistic leaders alone but through the misrepresentation of people, especially the urban poor and youth (Resnick 2015: 318; Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021: 342). As with Wine's People Power Movement, the idea of anti-establishment movements against long-time regimes and of politics "from below" is brought into stronger focus (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021: 342).

Historically, the anti-elitism and "us against them" divide of the former generation of populist leaders were directed against a post-independence elite and former colonial powers and often pursued a nationalist discourse based on the exclusion of certain groups (Melber 2018; Resnick 2017: 104; Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021). The use of state-owned media and political repression against any form of opposition marked these forms of populist strategies (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021: 337). Despite the dictatorial tendencies of many African populist leaders, the claim to pursue the will of "the people" was equally a key feature that was linked to a specific political program (ibid.: 336).

Interestingly, Museveni, who is classified both as a first-generation populist leader (ibid.: 338), and "future" populist leader (Resnick 2017: 104), uses performative elements as part of his populism. Thus the framing of himself as an "ordinary farmer" who is near the people and his use of local proverbs build part of his strategy (ibid.). This suggests that performance was already a relevant aspect for political leaders in Uganda in the past.

Analyses of contemporary populism in African countries highlight the strategy of opposition parties: to mobilize the young urban poor through economic programmes that target topics relevant to this group, such as job creation (Resnick 2015; Resnick 2017). Linked to this, economic and demographic trends are analyzed to explain the success of populist leaders or movements. The rapid expansion of urban areas, along with the growth of the informal economy and increased job losses that affect especially the urban youth, are seen as factors contributing to the popularity of leaders who use this situation as a “window of opportunity” for their politics (Resnick 2015: 318). Further, “weak party structures, the low political sophistication of most voters, and pervasive inequalities” (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021: 341) foster the success of populist movements, which channel the grievances and respond to those unsatisfied with the situation (Resnick 2015: 323).

Apart from these trends, the contemporary dynamics where popular culture and music are frequently employed as tools by opposition politicians open up a way to conceptualize populism as performance strategy. This conceptualization offers a perspective that goes beyond an analysis of socio-economic dynamics and examines how the country’s situation is picked up discursively by populist leaders as part of their performance. Further, more than defining common characteristics of populism, such as a rhetorical “us versus them” divide or anti-elitist discourse, the performance perspective looks at how common elements are used and related to a country’s context. The characteristics of populist discourse might change over time in their political direction, or meaning, as, for example, anti-elitism in the African context changed from addressing former colonial powers to incumbent oppressive regimes. Moreover, the meaning of populist elements, like the claim to speak for “the people”, might be specific to African countries, due to the multiplicity of ethnic groups and hence ambiguity of who is included in this category (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021: 342). Thus the performance lens allows it to contextualize the meaning of certain populist elements and consider how dynamics on the ground become part of the populist message through music and culture. By using performance as a conceptual lens for this analysis, the role popular culture and music plays in African politics is considered.

Analytical framework: populist performance

There are three key points or tools of populist performance which will be used as analytical guidelines. First, populist performance is defined as a means of communication, which includes a setting featuring a leader as the performer, an audience, and a stage (Strauss and O'Brien 2007: 2f.; Moffitt 2016: 4). There are different types of stages mentioned in the literature. Although not referring directly to populism, Strauss and O'Brien (*ibid.*) distinguish between trials, elections, and public space as settings for a stage. The latter two are relevant for the analysis, as Wine's engagement is considered against the background of the national elections and further to a large extent takes place through mobilizations in the public space. More broadly, media is identified as a platform that functions as a stage (Moffitt 2016: chap. 5). The types of stages are further related to modes of performance, which might be predictable or open-ended in their outcome (Strauss and O'Brien 2007: 3). Strauss and O'Brien (*ibid.*) therefore categorize performances with an open-ended outcome, which take place in the field of elections, manifestations, or planned events, as "theatre" and "individual performance".

Secondly, performance is articulated through a certain behaviour that entails various characteristics. One important point which is found in other populist concepts is the divide between two antagonistic sides: "the people" and their opposite (Moffitt 2016: 41). The leader thereby frames his or her person as representing "the people" (*ibid.*: 61f.) and more generally serves certain images of public representation or cultural images with which the public identifies (Hansen 2004: 27f.). Other features include the performance of "bad manners", which might also be formulated as "uncommon manners" in the political environment (Moffitt 2016: 41f.). Performances are furthermore based on "the use of a certain linguistic style or conceptual vocabulary, a certain way of dressing and acting in public" (Hansen 2004: 23).

The third key point refers to a repertoire of symbols repeated in the performative acts and which built the basis for representation and the communication of the political message (Baldwin-Philippi 2019: 393; Strauss and O'Brien 2007: 10). Moffitt (2016: 45f.) describes such a repertoire as a "populist toolbox", while Hansen (2004: 35) mentions "highly effective performative registers"

which include festivals and other symbols of representation, and Mazzarella (2019: 53) talks about archives of experience. The performative registers are employed to articulate a political message through engaging emotions and generating moods in the performance (Hansen 2004: 23; Strauss and O'Brien 2007: 3). Moffitt (2016: 128) thus argues that “performance” constitutes a core characteristic of populism, as it secures the “populist actors’ political survival”.

Based on these three aspects, the analysis carves out how Wine performs populism and relates the elements of his performance to the sociocultural and historical background of Uganda to generate political support.

Research context: music industry and Ugandan politics

Regarding the entrenchment of the music industry and African politics, Wine's background is of interest. Before engaging formally in politics, Wine was already known for his critical and anti-establishment music, produced by his successful entertainment company "Firebase Crew" (Schneidermann 2020, 8). One of Wine's elder brothers, Eddy Yawe, owns "Dream Studios", another popular music studio in Kampala (ibid.). But parts of Wine's family are also involved in formal politics. His eldest brother, Fred Nyanzi, was Local Councillor 1 for years and Wine made him national coordinator of People Power (ibid.; Nyangoma 2018). In 2011, Yawe ran for Parliament and Wine supported him by performing at his campaign events to mobilize poor youth in particular (Schneidermann 2020: 9). Wine's family also has older ties with Ugandan formal politics, reaching back to the grandfather, father and uncles who had various positions in the Democratic Party (ibid.). Resnick (2015: 341) highlights those backgrounds as a particularity of African populism, claiming that "unlike many Latin American leaders, African politicians who have employed a populist strategy rarely are genuine 'outsiders' to the established political structures they claim to oppose."

Wine is not the only musician exerting influence in politics through entertainment and music in Uganda. The country has a recent history of increased ties between the music industry and political mobilization. Nanna Schneidermann (ibid.: 5f.) cites a "rush towards politics" in the music industry in 2010 in Uganda, where musicians started giving election campaign concerts and shows or produced campaign songs for political parties with increasing frequency. The political elite noticed the power of entertainment to mobilize support, so that Museveni produced a rap song for his 2011 campaign (ibid.: 8).

Moreover, Wine's populist approach is not a completely new dynamic but fits into the larger context of decisions made by the opposition in Uganda to

challenge Museveni through “personalistic leadership” (Wilkins, Vokes, and Khisa 2021). This was once seen as the most promising tactic against the stigmatization and repression of the opposition by Museveni’s regime (ibid.). Hence, parallels to Wine’s predecessor Kizza Besigye’s strategy are found in Wine’s strategy of drawing media attention to the corruption of Museveni’s NRM system (ibid.: 634). Furthermore, Besigye, who was the most popular opposition candidate in the four previous national elections, organized highly mediated public protests and even arranged a swearing-in ceremony for himself as the “People’s President” (ibid.: 635). Wine’s mobilization of media and protests is very similar. Besigye also used the constant repression he faced from the state’s security forces to mobilize dissent towards the incumbent government (ibid.). The fact that both candidates also worked together, creating the United Forces for Change, underlines Wine’s continuation of the opposition strategy (ibid.: 630, 638). Intense media attention, especially via Western academia and media, focused on Wine’s approach as an unprecedented phenomenon, which Khisa (2021: 3) called a “Wine fetish”.

Beyond that, the massive repression and violence by the government (Burke and Okiror 2021; Kiruga 2021; Anonymous 2018) form a crucial part of the political context that shape Wine’s performance. In the 2016 elections, Wine mobilized opposition against the social media ban imposed by the government. In 2018 he was involved in the protests against the social media tax, which is explained as a measure against what Museveni termed “gossip” on YouTube and the like (Olewe 2018; Muzee and Enaifoghe 2020: 196). During the national elections, Wine’s electoral campaign faced massive repression and the media reported violence by security forces against Wine supporters, including not only teargas and water cannons but often arrests, deadly attacks, and abductions (Kiruga 2021; Burke and Okiror 2021; Abrahamsen and Bareebe 2021: 93). Further claims are made that the opposition leader was tortured by government forces before arriving at a court hearing, where he was accused of illegal possession of firearms (Busari and Grinberg 2018). Additionally, campaigning (including digital campaigning) was highly restricted, with concerts and other events being prohibited, and the implementation of a revised Act on stage plays and public entertainment, later called “the Anti-Bobi Wine Act” on social media (Abrahamsen and Bareebe 2021: 92f.; Schneidermann 2020).

Methodology

Although Wine's background plays certainly a decisive role regarding his ability to produce performative content, defining these linkages in detail is beyond the scope of this analysis. The focus here is on the performance itself, which elements are applied, and how popular culture is used to mobilize people. Therefore, the content and placement of Wine's music, videos and acting on stage is examined to show how populism is manifested through performance in Uganda. In other words, Wine's use of popular culture is analyzed to understand how, in the case of Uganda, populism is *performed*. This focus is limited in approaching the influence of economic or demographic factors, as in the above-discussed studies, on popular support for Wine. However, as performance and connections to the music and entertainment industry play a decisive role in rallying political support in Uganda and other African countries, instead of considering the economic proposals and party programmes of the "National Unity Platform", social media content is used as a basis for the analysis. Online platforms presented an important channel for Wine already in his previous campaigns and for opposition politics in general (Schneidermann 2020: 12; Wilkins, Vokes, and Khisa 2021). This limits the analysis to the performance itself. Nevertheless, local audiences are not only passive consumers but might influence how populist strategies are acted out by leaders (Nyairo and Ogude 2005: 229).

The selected material is comprised of song lyrics, music and election campaign videos, concerts, speeches and other events related to the elections. This also includes live streams published during that time and video collaborations with other musicians. These are complemented with online newspaper articles, interviews, and media reports about the campaigns (a list of the material is attached to the references). Thus the material encompasses a video playlist of Wine's electoral campaign around the country, containing 65 videos posted on the official YouTube channel of People Power. Further, it includes 21 videos, including five local media reports on public events

staged by Wine, one interview in international media, six live streams and speeches, and nine songs and music videos. Of the music videos, the most popular from 2017 until 2021 were selected, which furthermore contained political lyrics. As some of Wine's songs were already "political" before he engaged in formal politics, two more popular songs, "Dembe", published at the time of the 2016 elections, and "Time Bomb", from 2015, were included. The videos from local media and the live streams were chosen because they reported on relevant electoral events which were widely commented on on social media, such as the restricted boxing day event or Wine's live stream under house arrest. These reports, in addition to the electoral campaigns and speeches, provide an impression of Wine's appearance on stage and the way he uses live performances, apart from his produced music videos. In total, around 30 hours of video material formed the basis for the performance analysis. The selection of the material was limited to online content and by the author's language, as only content in English or with an available translation could be assessed.

As this article adds to the conceptual understanding of populism as performance, as opposed to be an exercise in theory-testing, the analysis follows a bottom-up approach, inspired by Baldwin-Philippi's (2019: 379) analysis of digital platforms as populist tools and Van-Sterkenburg et al.'s (2010) method of media content analysis. It is therefore not based on a fixed operationalized concept of populism but aims to identify recurring patterns and elements (Baldwin-Philippi 2019: 379) and how these built a populist performance in the particular context of Uganda. Outlined in detail in the theory section, the performance is analyzed through three key aspects, considering the "stages/modes of performance", "behaviours" and "populist repertoires" that form it. Hence these three pillars serve as guidelines to examine the material, including rhetoric content as well as performative and aesthetic aspects. This was done in two steps, starting with a semi-open coding process based on a grounded theory approach to "explore and generate themes that recur in the text[s]" (Van Sterkenburg, Knoppers, and De Leeuw 2010: 832), in this case speeches, lyrics and videos (Baldwin-Philippi 2019: 379; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Derived from the three theoretical pillars, each video was examined according to the following descriptors: "recurring symbols", "Wine's dressing style", "vocabulary and phrases used", "setting of the event". The last refers

to observations such as the type and mode of the performance, whether it was online and what atmosphere was created. This provided an overview of the populist elements and patterns which were repeated continuously. In a second step, coming back to the key aspects of performance, “stages”, “behaviours” and “repertoires”, these served to identify how the populist elements were articulated in a performative way. At the same time, it was analyzed how these elements relate to the national context (Van Sterkenburg, Knoppers, and De Leeuw 2010: 833). Thereby it was identified how Wine connects the populist elements to the cultural and political background of Uganda and uses performance as a political strategy.

Analysis: Bobi Wine's populist performance

The analysis is divided according to the four most recurring elements of Wine's performance. The first three, Wine as "freedom fighter", as "leader who unites Ugandans" and as "young politician from a new generation", form part of Wine's articulated, personal and political framing. The fourth element, the spontaneous creation of stages, refers to his performative skills, which are a crucial part of his strategy and explain how the situation for performance is actively created in public spaces and through social media. Based on the three key points of performance, discussed above, it is shown how the repeated main elements are acted out through the use of "stages", "behaviours" and "repertoires". Each section further discusses how the performative tools are applied in relation to the dynamics on the ground. Thereby it is shown how populism in Uganda is manifested through performance as a political strategy to gain support.

The freedom fighter

The lyrics "we are fighting for freedom" of Wine's campaign song, declared by him as a "message to the government" (Wine 2017), are symbolic of the leader's message of a struggle for equality, against the oppression by the current government. This "fight for freedom" against the political repression of Museveni and his forces constitutes Wine's main framing, which he does not only communicate in his song lyrics but through performing the role of "the freedom fighter". In his campaign speeches, Wine asks his followers to "go to every village, go to every market", to spread his message and join him in "the mission for freedom" (People Power TV 2020). Thus Wine embodies

the figure of the freedom fighter, telling the crowd: “I want you to be Bobi Wine” (ibid.), thus evoking a powerful symbolic picture of himself.

In his music videos, Wine relates his political activism to historical struggles against White or Western oppression, showing, for example, images of former African anticolonial activists such as Patrice Lumumba, and citing Nelson Mandela or American activist Malcolm X (Wine and Banton 2020). Also, he compares the current political situation as similar to “times of slave trade”, and portrays Ugandans as Museveni’s slaves, exploited by the government (Wine 2018, 2017). In relation to this, the figure of the freedom fighter is a strong cultural symbol in Uganda, as in other African countries (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021) and is thus part of what Mazzarella (2019: 53) terms “archive of experience”. In this regard, Museveni himself was called a “freedom fighter”, and is even acknowledged by Wine as a former “bush fighter” (Wine 2017), referring to Museveni’s rise to power. This figure is hence taken up for the political message, as it represents a known symbol in Uganda, which brings with it a reputation that is acknowledged, especially among older generations (Abrahamsen and Bareae 2021: 97).

Moreover, performing a fight for freedom is imbued with further urgency, considering the mentioned repression and violence by security forces towards Wine and his followers. In line with Besigye’s previous strategy (Wilkins, Vokes, and Khisa 2021), Wine takes up this situation and makes it part of his performance as the freedom fighter. People Power channels and videos are constantly showing acts of violence by security forces against Wine, his team, or supporters of his movement. Against this oppression, he calls “the people of Uganda” to “wake up” and see “the truth”, declaring that he has nothing to give his followers except “the truth” (Wine and Li 2020; People Power TV 2020; Wine 2018; Reuters 2021). Here again, Wine makes use of a known anti-state-violence message, which had already been used in previous Ugandan elections.

Against this background, the freedom-fighter performance is further communicated through elements of dress, which also form part of the “symbolic register” and underline the message of a “mission for freedom”. In nearly every video and event, a “Thomas Sankara-style red beret” (Wilkins, Vokes,

and Khisa 2021: 637), a symbol for the fight, is part of the performance, via either Wine himself or his supporters wearing the beret. In the same way, Wine is often shown in a military-like red uniform, containing the Ugandan national flag. After the violent attacks against him, he started wearing a bulletproof vest and helmet when campaigning (People Power TV 2020). Videos of Wine wearing vest and helmet speak for themselves and again support his embodiment of the fighter against oppression, who risks his life to speak the truth. This is also highlighted by Wine often wearing shirts showing the photographs of imprisoned or killed supporters (Wine and Li 2020). His audiences are often wearing red shirts, producing powerful images, with “red crowds” applauding Wine, who stands on the roof of his campaign car. These events are moreover explained by Wine as “history in the making”, while campaign commentators declare that “this is history before our eyes” (People Power TV 2020). The image of Wine talking to the masses and “making history” together with them highlights the importance of his appearance to his message.



Wine during his campaign in Arua in 2019.¹

¹ Bobi Wine, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10158292818793012&set=pcb.10158292838413012>.

His campaign song, “Freedom”, is part of the performative repertoire. Like the song “Unbwogable” in Kenya (Nyairo and Ogude 2005), it exemplifies how popular culture is used as means to rally political support. During electoral campaigns, “Freedom” is sung by the masses and crowds who come to see Wine on his tour; the leader himself sings along with his audience. Further, the repeatedly mentions of “fight” or “mission” is symbolized by raising one or both fists in the air, which the leader performs in his music videos and when standing on top of his car as it passes his supporters (People Power TV 2020). Combined, these constantly reproduced symbols of the repertoire form part of Wine’s populist performance.

The celebration of Wine as a freedom fighter is further connected to what Moffitt (2016: 42f.) terms “uncommon manners”. These are specific to the political landscape and background of Uganda. For example, Wine frames himself as representing an atypical picture of what is common in Ugandan politics, by highlighting his youth in contrast to Museveni’s. This is discussed more in detail below. Additionally, he presents himself as one of the few speaking out against Museveni, breaking the rule of “obeying” (NBS Television 2018). Wine also explicitly distances himself from the figure of “the politician” by taking up the role of “the Ghetto President”, a representative of the poor, and telling his audience, “I come here as one of you” (People Power TV 2020; Wine 2018; Schneidermann 2020: 3). Distancing himself from other politicians in his “message to fellow Ugandans,” Wine declares, “I am your comrade in the struggle for a free Uganda” (Wine 2018). Wine thereby performs a status of “being different” in order to also appeal to those who do not identify with current politics. Going back in history, this image of the new, young leader, differentiating himself from incumbent politicians, was taken up by Museveni. On Twitter, he is quoted from 1989, stating: “I’m a freedom fighter. I’d feel insulted if you called me a politician. I want to finish rebuilding the army, police and the judiciary and leave the country with a new generation” (Daily Monitor 2021). Wine’s performance of being a new and uncommon leader, therefore, draws on earlier meanings of what is considered “special” in the political landscape, although these might not be “uncommon” in the true sense of the word. The “atypical” behaviour is contrasted with Museveni’s long stay in power but strongly builds on established meanings of what an “unusual”, fresh politician looks like. While Museveni’s freedom-fighter

figure was related to the image of the war hero, Wine's fights against the overstaying regime, as a former "ghetto youth".

It becomes clear that the "performance repertoire" and "archive of experience" are essential for Wine's performance, as they allow him to pick up populist elements and symbols which already are significant in the Ugandan context. The same elements might not have the same influence for performing a political message in another country. This highlights the need for a contextualization of performative populism, as the symbols and elements which are chosen for the performance are tied to the background of the country or region and moreover change in their relevance over time.

Uniting the people of Uganda

The second populist element which repeatedly came up in the video material was the performance as the leader who unites a divided country. Therefore, Wine is presented as a leader who in contrast to the incumbent president represents "the people" and cares for their needs and wishes. While current politicians are characterized in Wine's music videos as corrupt and not caring for "the people's" needs (Wine and Li 2018), the musician explains himself as representative of the Ugandan people. For example, the video to the song "Uganda Zukuka" ("Uganda, wake up") shows a politician who prefers to watch children's cartoons instead of news about protests, while Wine sings that "our leaders don't seem to care for the next generation" (Wine and Li 2018). This narrative follows a "the people" versus "elite" divide which is typical for a "populist toolbox" (Moffitt 2016, 41) but has some particularity in the Ugandan or generally African context. Considering the variety of ethnic groups in most African countries, defining who is part of "the unitary 'the people'" gets more complex (Mutsvauro and Salgado 2021: 342). However, for Wine this provides the basis for performing the image of a leader who in contrast to the current regime strives to "reunite" Uganda as one people.

Therefore, the idea of "the people" and Wine as their representative is articulated based on a kind of "inclusive nationalism". This becomes clear in Wine's music videos, showing "ordinary" citizens with different professions, such as nurses, taxi drivers, and farmers, all fighting together for the same mission

(Wine et al. 2018). During his campaigns, Wine continuously denounces problems of tribalism, religious conflicts, and age and class divides, which according to him are promoted by the government (People Power TV 2020). In his campaign song, Wine's approach of uniting Ugandans is enforced by stating: "no matter your age and no matter your sex, no matter your religion, no matter your tribe, whether educated or uneducated" (Wine 2017). Wine makes his idea of inclusion part of his performance and, despite the state-driven violence against his movement, even explains to the security forces that he is not fighting against but for them (Wine 2019a; NTV Uganda 2020). By dedicating a song to Uganda's police forces, singing "the oppression I am facing is the same oppression you are facing", the message of inclusion is underlined.

In addition to the videos and lyrics, Wine himself presents examples of a "lived inclusiveness" in daily life. An example of this is the live stream during his house arrest, where he composes a multilingual song together with his friends, all coming from different social and ethnic backgrounds, and singing to the police and military that they are fighting for them too (Wine 2019b). In the live stream Wine explains that through looking into the eyes of police officers, even in situations of violence, moments of connection might be created where the two opponents start seeing themselves in one another (Anonymous 2019: 3).



Scene from the music video of "Tuliyambala Engule", showing amongst others a doctor, taxi driver, nurse, and farmer dancing together while Wine sings: "As Ugandans, we are brothers and sisters" (Wine et al. 2019).

Furthermore, the promotion of peace and unity plays a role in this narrative, which Wine already included in his older songs. In the lyrics of “Obululu” and “Dembe”, he calls for peace and unity amongst Ugandans and refers to the violent outbreaks during the 2007 Kenyan elections as a result of the lack of social unity (Wine 2016; Schneidermann 2020). The reference to the neighbouring country shows that these and similar calls for peace have a wider meaning in Uganda and beyond.² While it was indeed Museveni who highlighted his role as “the guerrilla leader who brought peace and stability to the country” (Schneidermann 2020: 97), Wine appropriates this image and instead declares the government as the ones disturbing that peace by dividing Ugandans according to “age, tribe and religion” (People Power TV 2020). By performing inclusiveness and the aim to unite “the people”, Wine’s performance builds on existing peace narratives and symbolisms of Ugandan history and politics.

The generational divide

The vision of a united Uganda is, however, enforced through a generational divide between old politicians in power and a young generation aspiring to take over. The third element which builds the overall performance is the framing of “the people” represented by a youthful leader against old leaders staying in power too long. Here again, Wine performs his youthfulness as an “uncommon” characteristic in contrast to the old political elite, which follows the differentiation strategy typical for the more recent forms of African populism (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021: 341).

Wine marks this divide by stating in one of his songs that “we are the grandchildren of the independence generation” and “the grandparents of the future generations” (Wine and Li 2018). In the same song, he claims: “we are the youngest population in the world ... the leaders of the future” (ibid.). In another music video, Wine addresses Museveni as “Mzee”, a word in Luganda for respectfully addressing an old man and sings that he “beg[s] his fellow

² In Kenya, the constant calls for peace and unity to prevent violence and dissent led to the term “peaceocracy”, discussed for example by: Lynch 2019; Maweu 2017; Cheeseman, Maweu, and Ouma 2019.

elders to talk to him” (Wine 2017). Visually underlining this generational divide, the video shows images of Museveni from 1986, next to a photograph of him taken in 2017, highlighting the long duration of staying in power. The criticism of Museveni overstaying in his position is a constant topic in Wine’s speeches and music videos (Wine 2017; People Power TV 2020; Wine 2021b).

In contrast to that, Wine presents his youthfulness by performing a physically fit and strong leader. In his campaign videos, Wine is shown doing intensive boxing training at home, before leaving for the campaign trail (People Power TV 2020). At the yearly organized boxing day, the leader highlights his boxing skills and the importance of being physically fit (NBS Television 2018). Similarly, the music video of his song “Freedom” starts with Wine doing push-ups in a prison cell (Wine 2017). In the electoral events, the age difference between Wine and Museveni is continuously commented on, for example, when one of Wine’s team members states that Museveni knows “he is facing a young man who is physically fit” (People Power TV 2020). More than criticizing Museveni verbally, the examples demonstrate the performed role of the young dynamic leader, in contrast to the old dictator.

The analysis of the videos shows how populist elements associated with culturally specific meanings are used strategically through performative means. Beyond the proposal of a certain economic programme or discursive critique, Wine’s political message is performed, by taking up elements of popular culture and using the visual appearance and behaviour of a leader. Populism becomes therefore apparent as a strategy of performance, which relies on elements that are tied to Uganda’s particular historical, political and cultural background. Performing populism further requires a range of performative skills. These are discussed in the next section.

Performance skills: creating a stage and generating moods

The performance of Wine is based on the ability to, sometimes spontaneously, create various stages and switch between modes of performance. By considering the different modes and settings of performance, it becomes clear how Wine changes between “theatre” scenes and “individual performance”, and how both public and private spaces become stages to perform

his message and generate moods. Therefore, it is not only planned events or shows which are performed, but the performance of the freedom fighter takes place in private spheres spontaneously and is dependent on engaging people's emotions.

In a video reporting the ban of Wine's planned "Boxing Day" event, Wine spontaneously produces a symbolic image when positioning himself in front of two water cannons, opening his arms in a gesture of questioning (NBS Television 2018). Changing from a planned show to a spontaneous "individual performance", he includes the ban of his event in his performance and transforms the public space into a stage. The anti-violence message, already discussed above, is therefore picked up instantly and through the use of social media turned into a theatre scene of Wine as the freedom fighter against the suppressive government. When performing in front of campaign crowds, Wine switches spontaneously from giving a political interview to singing one of his songs (Spark TV 2017). He dances for the spectators, and when the crowd asks him to sing, he gives an acapella concert (People Power TV 2020). This further reveals the crucial role of social media as a stage, providing the possibility to record and stream spontaneous reactions.



Wine standing in front of two water cannons after his "Boxing Day" event was banned by the government (Africa Times 2018).

The overall performance of Wine is to a large extent dependent on his ability to “engage emotions” and “generate moods” (Hansen 2004: 23; Glaser and Strauss 1967: 3). Therefore, Wine transforms different spaces into a stage by performing. However, this takes place not only spontaneously but also through planned performative events, presented through a “theatre mode of performance”, such as the appearance of Wine during his campaigns standing on top of a car and being celebrated by a mass of people dressed in red and shouting the singer’s first name “Bobi” (People Power TV 2020). Therefore, the campaigns, concerts, and live streams combine elements of political speech with singing and dancing performances. At times, his home also serves as a stage for his communication with the audience (People Power TV 2020; Wine 2019b). In the “Freedom Show”, staged on a boat on Lake Victoria, a calm and peaceful atmosphere is evoked with Wine and his friends singing together “as artists” for freedom (Wine and Li 2020). Combining the planned “theatre mode” and “individual performance” in the public space, the body itself of the leader is transformed into a symbol for his political message. The video material presents Wine often simply standing, with the gesture of his fist in the air, without moving or saying a word. The leader’s body alone is already performing, representing symbolically the content of Wine’s message and the “freedom fighter” (People Power TV 2020).

The use of different modes of performance makes clear how performing a political message is not only done through the use of context-specific populist elements but moreover is based on the ability to produce symbols and images that engage emotions and create stages in public and private spheres. The analysis furthermore illustrates the relevance of music videos, theatrical scenes, dress, certain phrases and styles and the overall performance as a symbolic figure for the political campaign.

Conclusion

It has been shown that populism in the case of Wine in Uganda is manifested through performance, based on the use of popular culture and populist elements related to the country's history. By using key aspects of performance as an analytical lens, four recurring populist elements were extracted from videos of electoral campaigns, speeches, and shows as well as music videos. Thus Wine performs the figure of the "freedom fighter" against the oppressive regime, taking up a meaningful symbol for Uganda's history and challenging Museveni's image as a former "bush fighter". Secondly, Wine takes up existing narratives of peace and unity and is presented as the new leader who aims to "reunite" Ugandans as one people, reconciling ethnic and religious cleavages and promoting an inclusive nationalism. This goes along with the third element, performing the young leader who is a fresh force in politics and challenges the old elite, which is overstaying in power. Lastly, the overall performance of these populist images is based on Wine's skills in generating the moods of people through creating stages also spontaneously in private or public spheres. The populist performance thereby relies on symbols and elements which have a meaning in Uganda's culture, history and social context, and moreover uses popular culture, entertainment, music and dressing styles to rally political support. The songs, music videos and shows, therefore, make use of performance tools, such as "archives of experiences" and "repertoires", certain behaviours, and styles and the creation of stages through the modes of "individual performance" and "theatre".

Based on the example of Wine's performance strategy, the article argues for the fruitfulness of a conceptualization of populism as performance in the context of African politics. Using populist performance as an analytical

lens, however, requires a contextualization to identify the role of the specific elements which are used for the performance strategy and understand their relation to the dynamics on the ground. Moreover, Wine's use of performance through music, symbols and entertainment must be understood as something embedded in Ugandan politics and African politics more generally. Apart from the role popular culture and music play for African politics, Wine's family background in the music industry and formal politics, as well as general trends in Ugandan opposition politics, might have influenced the use of performance as a political strategy. Wine's populist performance hence presents an example of a "new form" of African populism, which is linked to the idea of "movements" and political protest from below (Mutsvairo and Salgado 2021).

A contextualized concept of populism as performance allows us to go beyond defining the "typical" characteristics of the populist toolbox or universal elements of political performance and instead consider the meaning of populist elements in relation to their background and why they are strategically taken up. Moreover, the case of Uganda has shown that based on the overlaps between the music industry and politics, populism plays out as performance. This might be similar in other African countries, with similar political dynamics. Hence populism in an African context might differ from other forms of populism in Europe or America and must be regarded against its history. More generally, this conceptualization brings not only the political strategy to the fore but further refrains from assigning populism to a certain normative or political classification. In this way, understandings of populism as necessarily undemocratic or exclusive might be questioned.

Certainly, more aspects that shape Wine's political approach could be examined. In this regard, the analysis is limited, as it did not consider "the audience" and supporters, through examining, for example, social media comments. This could lead to further insights for a definition of "performative populism" and the role people's engagement with the content plays for the performance. Research in this direction could furthermore examine the broader meaning of populist performance for political systems in African countries.

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