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Campaign rallies and political meaning-making

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ABSTRACT

Prior research determines whether politicians at rallies make programmatic, clientelist or personalist appeals. We argue that this reductive approach obscures the variety of meaning-making at rallies. We offer a vision of rallies as complex communicative events, at which multiple actors co- and counter-produce messages in numerous ways. Nonetheless, we argue that there are patterns in meaning-making at rallies. Rallies are produced in accordance with a genre which guides what components are included in them and how they are interpreted. We argue that rallies produced in that genre fashion and foreground three constructs above others: candidates, collectivities and contests. They fashion them, among other things, through representative claims. Altogether, we show that rallies are significant sites of political communication in Africa and worldwide.

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Election campaign rallies are hubs of activity. In the crowd, hawkers sell refreshments, activists shepherd attendees and security form cordons. On-stage, entertainers, praise-singers, MCs and priests step-forward to perform in turn. They punctuate addresses by speakers, who are flanked by rows of officials, politicians and dignitaries. Off-stage, volunteers and professionals arrange the site; technicians operate lights, screens, sound systems, cameras and drones; drivers wait to whisk speakers away; organisers oversee it all. Among the spectators, some come to listen; others to be entertained; others to be seen. Some come to show support; others to voice dissent; others to disrupt. Some come under coercion or on the promise of reward. Through media, others witness and re-mediate the rally. Police

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supervise it; bureaucrats regulate it. In this context, rallies enable speakers to communicate with other elite attendees, for members of the audience to communicate with speakers and with each other, and for all present to communicate with mediated rally-audiences. Overall, rallies are elaborate ‘productions’ (Paget, 2019, 2023a), in which messages are co- and counter-produced as speakers, notables, media, and audiences work to reinforce, undermine and/or complicate the messages planned by rally organisers.

Given the energy that goes into organising rallies, and the numbers of people that collectively attend them, it is remarkable how little campaign rallies have been studied (Paget, 2019). Many election campaigns around the world are ‘rally-intensive’ (Paget, 2019), ‘rally-centric’ (Lynch, 2023) or ‘rally-central’ (Kumar, 2022). In these campaigns, rallies both enjoy intense media coverage and constitute a large proportion of political communications. It is particularly remarkable how little rallies have been studied in sub-Saharan Africa, which is home to both the most rally-intensive election campaigns, and the greatest concentration of rally-intensive campaigns, in the world (Paget, 2019). Recent research on the sub-continent has shown where parties concentrate their rallies (Horowitz, 2016; Brierley & Kramon, 2020), and how activities, people, devices and money are arranged to produce them (Paget, 2022, 2023a). In this special issue, we instead ask: what meanings are made and communicated at rallies? In particular, what messages are communicated by the various actors involved in rallies described above, and what meanings emerge from the interactions between them?

Most prior studies of political messages at rallies in the Global South follow Herbert Kitschelt (2000). They analyse whether politicians and parties make programmatic, clientelist, and/or charismatic appeals (Szwarcberg, 2012; Fujiwara & Wantchekon, 2013; Kramon, 2017; Muñoz, 2019). In this special issue, we depart from these studies. Our founding premise is that the meanings inscribed in messages at rallies are legion. The sheer diversity of meanings cannot be folded into these reductive categories. In this special issue, we approach the topic open-mindedly. We interpret and explore the meanings which rally messages contain. In so doing, we build on a prior generation of studies which adopted similar approaches to study mass political events in closed authoritarian regimes (Haugerud, 1995; Jourde, 2005; Wedeen, 2015).

Analysing what meanings are constructed at and through rallies requires a constructivist – or interpretivist-subjectivist – philosophy of social science (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). It also involves examining the granular detail of rallies – from the individual speeches and performances to the staging, mediatisation and responses – and abstracting away common patterns in meaning-making that emerge at and through them. To this end, this introductory article draws on our first-hand experience of rallies. The

contributors to this special issue have attended numerous rallies in Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, and have followed media coverage of many more. In addition, many of our interviews with candidates, party officials, political activists and citizens over the years have touched on their preparations for, and experiences, of rallies. We approached these interactions with the principles of exploratory research and participant observation in mind. We observed the events and those at them with 'wide-angle lenses', often with cameras in-hand and notebooks open (Spradley, 1980). We have developed our insights in conversation with the other contributors to this special issue through a succession of five conference panels and a dedicated workshop.

We identify themes in rallies that cut across parties, countries, and time. Rallies share these commonalities, we theorise, because they belong to a genre of performance. In accordance with genre theory (Chandler, 1997; Montgomery, 2007), this rally genre not only consists of a shared understanding of what components rallies consist, such as staged arrivals, speech-making, stage decorations and audience participation; it equally consists of a shared understanding of what those components signify. This provides an interpretive frame which various actors including audiences draw on to follow, play with or subvert rallies.

Despite such complexity, we argue that three constructs are fashioned and foregrounded above others through the rally genre: *collectivities*, *candidates* and *contests*, or the 'three C's'. Audiences physically assemble at rallies, while other audiences gather to watch, read about or listen to rallies. A variety of possible collective identities are constructed out of and grafted onto these congregations of bodies and attention: partisans, localities, peoples, ethnicities, and nations, among other things. Candidates offer innumerable presentations of self from the stage at rallies. The personas which they construct are re-presented and re-constructed in turn, not least by others on stage and in how audiences interact with them. At rallies, political contests are also constructed and acted out; contests in which possible beatific and horrific futures are at stake.

We argue that these three C's are constructed in a diversity of ways at rallies. However, we also argue that a common theme cuts across them: representative claim-making, as theorised by Michael Saward. In such representative claims, a claim-maker asserts that some subject represents some object (2010). In so doing, claim-makers characterise the representative 'and their constituents and the links between the two' (Saward, 2006, p. 302). Thereby, 'they argue or imply that ... [the subject is] the best representatives of the constituency *so understood*' (Saward, 2006, p. 302, emphasis in original). For instance, a local notable might claim that a political aspirant represents a local community in that they share the values which the community is said to hold. These claims are not always accepted. On the contrary,

they are often revised or rejected. Nevertheless, they remain the subjects of continuous contestation. We see rallies as sites at which not only politicians, but other actors – notables, media and immediate and distant audiences – also make representative claims. This culminates in a messy co- and counter-production of meanings as various actors reinforce, undermine and/or complicate each other's messaging. Thus, at rallies, candidates are portrayed, among other things, as representatives; collectivities are presented, among other things, as constituencies which are represented; and thus-constructed representatives and constituencies alike are each located in imagined political contests.

The articles in this special issue write in or adjacent to the framework which we develop in this introductory article. Some focus (among other things) on particular constructions and communications of one or more of the three C's (see in particular, Lewanika, 2023; Paget, 2023c; Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). Paget (2023c) analyses how representative claims are made at rallies. Others focus on yet other meanings made and communicated at rallies (see in particular, Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2023; Kwayu, 2023). Yet others analyse how the meanings communicated are crafted with particular audiences in mind (see in particular, Lewanika, 2023; Lynch, 2023; Paget, 2023c; Waddilove, 2023; Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). We refer to these papers throughout the body of the article below.

In the first section of this article, we show how the complexity of meaning-making at rallies cannot be reduced to programmatic, clientelist and/or charismatic appeals. In the second, we theorise what a rally genre is, and outline how rallies are produced in this genre fashion and foreground our three C's above other constructs, and privilege representative claim-making in doing so. In the third to fifth sections, we show how the messages produced at rallies foreground representative and audience claims-making around candidates, collectivities and contests. Finally, we conclude by highlighting what this approach adds to our understanding of rallies and the paths for future research that it opens. Throughout this paper, we make references to other papers in this special issue to highlight ways in which the contributions both fit within, and move beyond, this theoretical framework.

Communicating through rallies

In the Global South, rallies have largely been analysed through Kitschelt's framework as places where politicians make programmatic, clientelist and/or charismatic appeals (Kitschelt, 2000). In this vein, many have analysed rallies as sites at which gifts are given or promised (Fujiwara & Wantchekon, 2013) and/or, adjacently, generosity and accessibility are displayed (Kramon, 2017; Cheeseman et al., 2021). Similarly, while studies in Latin America do not claim that clientelist appeals are made to rally attendees, they nonetheless

argue that rallies rely on clientelism to function (Szwarcberg, 2012; Muñoz, 2019). Distinctly, but equally reductively, rallies have been studied as events that make ethnic appeals (Gadjanova, 2020), transmit information (Conroy-Krutz, 2016), mobilise election-day turnout, and/or persuade (Paget, 2018).

This Kitscheltian lens, and the others adjacent to it, offer significant analytic insight. Nonetheless, we do not adopt it. Instead, our starting-point is that rallies are 'complex events' (Gilman, 2011) and sites at which many actors meet and act – sometimes in harmony and sometimes at cross-purposes. The tangle of activities which rallies contain tugs at the boundaries of Kitschelt's framework.

First, many people speak. Politicians speak from the stage, of course, but so do the ensemble of performers, celebrants and officiants that precede them. So do audiences and the media operators reporting on them, the party and candidates' communication teams, and citizen 'prod-users' who share their experiences across social and pavement media (Gadjanova et al., 2022; Lynch, 2023).

Second, this speech takes many forms. It includes oratory, but also other aspects of performance – from movement and dress to silences and sequencings (Goffman, 1959). Some performances are delivered solo; others are built-up out of interactions. Some interactions are between those on-stage; others are between those on the stage and in the crowd (Karakaya & Edgell, 2022) and some are between those immediately gathered and secondary audiences (Chadwick, 2017; Parks, 2019; Lynch, 2023). These performances produce not only texts and audio material but images (Ademilokun & Olateju, 2016), still and moving alike. All of these are modes of communication: they form semiotic signs or symbols that encode meanings (Geertz, 1973). These modes of communication are then modulated by variety in the events themselves. Rallies vary from village rallies attended by tens or hundreds of people to walking rallies (Kwayu, 2023), big-wig rallies (Lewanika, 2023) and, especially in countries which host presidential systems of the sort found so commonly in Africa, presidential mega-rallies attended by hundreds of thousands.

In these communications, multiple intentions and designs intersect. People attend rallies to become better informed, to see political celebrities up close, to watch the entertainment, to aid their party or candidate, to undermine those they oppose, to receive gifts or to comply with coercion. Politicians and their parties endeavour to win supporters and mobilise them to turnout. Equally, they use rallies to demonise opponents and to de-campaign them by making their opponents' causes seem hopeless (Lynch, 2023; Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). For those with little chance of winning, rally communications are projected into the future; displays of support at rallies can position candidates for future election campaigns and help them in negotiations over coalitions and possible cabinet positions

(Beardsworth, 2020; Cheeseman et al., 2021; Waddilove, 2023). Media choose how to cover rallies to garner audience attention, in fulfilment of ideals of news, and/or in alignment with the above-mentioned partisan goals. Simultaneously, political communication teams endeavour to favourably fashion traditional and social media coverage of their rallies and negatively fashion the coverage of their opponents (Lynch, 2023).

Altogether therefore rallies are sites of a multitude of communications. They are used by many actors, for many purposes, using many forms to produce a variety of meanings, in events that are themselves complex and unpredictable. This abundance of messaging and meaning-making remains obscured however, if rallies are only viewed through a Kitscheltian lens. That framework filters out the diversity in who speaks, how they speak, what they say and to whom so that they can be ordered into pre-set categories that focus solely on candidate appeals.

In exploring the meanings made at rallies, we draw on a prior generation of research on mass political events in authoritarian regimes. The exemplars of this canon are Angélique Haugerud (1995), writing about *barazas* (state-convened public meetings) in single-party Kenya, Cédric Jourde (2005) writing on presidential tours in authoritarian Mauritania, and Lisa Wedeen (2015) writing on mass spectator events in authoritarian Syria. These studies offer numerous insights which we echo here, not least that elite relations are displayed and constituted on stage, that meanings are made through speaker-crowd interactions, and that such interactions are contested. However, their insights are limited by the closed authoritarian contexts about which they wrote. The rallies in multiparty, albeit often electoral authoritarian, Africa which we study are sites where different constellations of meaning are made. Lisa Gilman's (2011) study of women's dance groups in authoritarian and democratic Malawi is the principal bridge-study between this previous generation of studies and ours. She studies how those groups perform ideas of nation, party and candidate, while negotiating their own (sometimes, transactional) relationships with political actors. We draw on her insights both about the complexity of political performances, and about the variety and multiple meanings simultaneously articulated at and through them.

Commonalities in meaning-making

Asking what messages are made at rallies raises the further question: are the messages made at rallies distinct from messages made at other sites and on other media? The notion that a particular means or medium of communication shapes the meanings made through it is not novel; it is well established in communication studies. Trivially, for example, radio enables communication by sound (which goes beyond the limits of text-based

media). These audio affordances enable new formats, such as live-interviews, and improvised talk (Scannell, 1991). Technological affordances aside, a medium shapes messages through the multiple, partial cultures that form in association with it. Such media cultures consist, not least, of genres. Genre theory covers many subjects. It was previously developed to theorise bodies of texts – plays, folk tales, novels – but has since been appropriated to understand a variety of cultural formations (Chandler, 1997). Genres are constructs which specify configurations of common features that their instances share, such as tropes and dramatic sequences. Analysts develop concepts of genres not only to make their underlying features visible to the analyst; they develop them to analyse latent (or overt) understandings of genres on which producers and audiences alike draw. Audiences make sense of performances in the contexts that (constructed) genres provide: they watch ‘a chat show’, for example, on the understanding that it is an instance of the genre ‘chat show’, with all that entails about format, role, content and style (Chandler, 1997). This understanding shapes audience expectations of what will occur and enables audiences to make sense of things. Knowing this, producers make chat shows with these genre-ideas in mind, whether their intent is to conform to, play upon, subvert or defy them.

Media studies are replete with the analysis of genre. Take, for example, Montgomery’s granular study of broadcast news (Montgomery, 2007). He concludes that this genre is composed of multiple subunits. They begin as small, routinised and encoded text excerpts. These units are arranged to form subgenres, such as headline reading, anchor monologues, field reports, and panel debates. These units and subunits of news discourses are overlaid by, and combine with, other elements: visuals, anchor desks, infographics, news feeds, video footage and theme music. Together these ‘patterned, recurrent configurations of elements or units’ form genres, and these genres encompass ‘shared understandings between producers and audiences about forms, and the purposes they serve’ (Montgomery, 2007, p. 27). Therefore, a media genre consists of a combination of performative actions, material devices, and subgenres in turn. Simultaneously, it exists as an interpretive frame which pre-encodes meanings in all of the above. Media studies concludes that these shared media cultures affect what is constructed and communicated in news.

We argue that the rally too constitutes a genre (see Paget, 2023c). They certainly share a minimal format as a ‘public event at which speakers address an audience face-to-face for the ostensible purpose of politically mobilizing it’ (Paget, 2019, p. 451). This at least outward defining purpose and the asymmetries in role it entails differentiates the rally from other event formats such as the lecture, the sermon, or the (dialogic) meeting. Its publicness distinguishes the (public) rally from the (closed-door) meeting. Rallies also contain common elements, not least the many actions,

interactions, symbols and material items described above. They are also arranged in established ways. For instance, there is a common structure to rally schedules. Some organisers follow it to the letter; others play with or improvise upon it (Kwayu, 2023; Lynch, 2023; Paget, 2023a, 2023c). It begins with a programme of entertainment, which is interspersed with the theatrical arrival of special guests (Paget, 2023a). This entertainment is followed by a succession of speeches by politicians in ascending order of importance and seniority, which culminates with those by the candidates.

We argue that this genre shapes what meanings are made at rallies (Paget, 2023c). Rallies' many co-producers determine what components to deploy in their production in reference to the genre-defined configuration of components. Co- and counter-producers encode these productions and audiences make sense of them in reference to the genre-defined interpretive frame. Specifically, we argue that at rallies produced in this genre, three constructs are fashioned and foregrounded above others: candidates, collectivities and contests.

We also argue that a common but non-exclusive theme runs through rallies produced in this genre: representative claim-making, as theorised by Saward (2010). Saward conceives of representation not as a substantive acting for, as it is conventionally understood. Instead, he theorises it as a claim that some representative speaks for, stands for, resembles, or in some other manner signifies a constituency. He envisages that making a representative claim involves fashioning a characterisation of both the representative and the constituency. However, it also involves claiming that there is some correspondence between these characterisations, a 'subject-object link', which makes the former representative of the latter. Such representative claims are often contested or rejected. Representative claim-makers depend on the constituency about whom claims are made or at least the audience to whom claims are made for their legitimation. This claim-making, thus conceived, certainly takes place in and in reference to electoral institutions. Nevertheless, it also takes place beyond them, including at the rallies which we study (Paget, 2023c), as others, using different terminologies and frameworks, have gleaned (Alexander, 2010; Montgomery, 2020; Karakaya & Edgell, 2022).

Building on these insights, we focus on rallies as sites for such representative claims-making by candidates, but also as sites at which other 'speakers' – be they notables, media and immediate and distant audiences – can also make claims about and help to co- or counter-produce representative claims (Paget, 2023c). The following three sections elaborate on the fashioning and foregrounding of collectivities, candidates, and contests respectively. Each discusses how, among other things, collectivities are constructed as constituencies, candidates are constructed as representatives, and contests are framed within broader power struggles that

would-be representatives 'need' to win or lose to facilitate beatific, and avoid horrific, futures.

Constructing collectivities

The space in which an audience stands varies. It may simply be a field, clearing or street. It may consist of a purpose-built structure, such as an assembly hall or stadium stands. Some sites are artfully crafted to guide where attendees are positioned in relation to the stage and speaker. In our analysis, they gather spectators; they hem them in together. Even in the simplest venue, an audience does not simply stand; it assembles. Spectators at a rally share a common point of focus: the area or 'stage' where the speakers congregate. The barest format of the rally – orators speaking and audience listening – makes the stage a point of shared attention. Spectators do not spread out to fill the available space at a rally like a gas across space; most converge upon and congregate around the stage.

The gathering and concentrating of an audience is an act of assembling: of bodies physically coming together and acting in unison (Butler, 2015). This assembling turns those bodies into a joint-entity, or what Bruno Latour calls an assemblage (2005). This assemblage is a potential resource for the construction of collective identities. It provides a ready-made collective body onto which different collective identities can be projected. Interpreted through the framework that rally genre provides, such an assemblage is constructed at a minimum as an 'audience' or 'crowd'. However, at rallies, it is simultaneously constructed as an embodiment of other collectivities.

These acts of identity formation begin within the immediate audience itself. Audience members fashion and present such identities not only for themselves, but the audience as a whole and/or sub-sections of it. Some such self-constructions and collective self-constructions of identity are expressed through voice. They are exhibited through songs and choices of language which connote identity. They are encoded in writing and symbols, borne aloft or inscribed on banners, flags and vehicles. They are encoded in peoples' bodies themselves, through the clothes, cloths, paints and accessories they choose to wear (Butler, 1988; Ademilokun & Olateju, 2016; Vittorini, 2022; Waddilove, 2023).

Equally, identities are projected onto rally audiences by speakers from the stage. Speakers ascribe identities to audiences. They address them by terms that help make those identities. Other times they connote those identities through the language which they choose to speak, the idioms that they deploy, and the manner in which they choose to address the audience. With this in mind, candidates and their advocates fashion images of the audience before them from the podium. Simultaneously, their identities are built in contrast to 'others' or 'them' which they are not.

Prior research recognises the potential of the rally for identity construction as part of one form of politics: populism. Some argue, for example, that populists use rallies to fashion ‘the people’ from the stage (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Fraser, 2017). Certainly, the ‘visuality’ (Ademilokun & Olateju, 2016; Chadwick, 2017) of bodies pressed together in rallies makes for images that lend themselves to the construction of big collectivities such as ‘the people’ (Paget, 2023c). However, we and our contributors find that rallies lend themselves to the construction of numerous such identities – of both those who are immediately present, and those who are conjured in the abstract. Hannah Waddilove (2023), for example, analyses how political affiliations are constructed and projected onto rally audiences, while Paget (2023c) finds that locality is often a prominent identity projected onto an audience.

However, audiences’ *identities* are not the only aspects of collectivities that are constructed at rallies. Audiences’ beliefs and emotions are too. Often, of course, these are expressed by immediate audiences themselves. Demands are called out. Lone calls are echoed and reinforced by wider audiences. Slogans are expressed as chants. Signs and symbols are raised for all to see. Excitement, euphoria, interest, scepticism, hostility, resentment and outrage alike can be carried by the expression, response and tenor of audience communications. Often, these conflicting ideas are expressed simultaneously by audience members in rival attempts to express and define audience response.

Equally, audience opinion is constructed and reflected back on to audiences by others. For example, speakers hail audiences for the opinions which, they claim, they have voiced. They thank them for the enthusiastic welcome they have offered, or articulate grievances thought to be held by people from the area. Likewise, media actors and party communication teams reframe audience responses (Chadwick, 2017; Parks, 2019; Wyatt, 2021; Lynch, 2023). For instance, repeated use of props such as a boat by Zambia’s Patriotic Front – calling on the crowd to ‘get in the boat’ – and a coffin by Zimbabwe’s ZANU-PF and Tanzania’s Chadema (Paget, 2019) – signifying the political death of their opponent – help to entrench ideas about who is in and who is out, who makes up the political ‘us’ and the ‘them’. Ahead of Kenya’s 2022 elections, campaign teams doctored the audio or visual reports of meetings to increase the sound of hecklers or show much larger crowds (Lynch, 2023). One outcome of these constructions of audiences is that they shape assessments of candidate and party popularity (Muñoz, 2019). Media often cover rallies through a horse-race frame, interpreting which campaign is apparently most popular. In this vein, rally attendance is read as a sign of the support for particular campaigns among different groups (Lewanika, 2023).

By constructing audience size, identities, opinions and feelings, representative claims are made (see Paget, 2023c). Saward argues that representative

claims not only construct representatives. They rely for their plausibility on a correspondence between the representatives and the constituencies that they purport to represent (Saward, 2010). The minimal rally genre – speakers addressing and audiences listening – creates an ideal venue in which to construct those correspondences, and thus co-produce those representative claims. These correspondences take many forms, such as alignments of policy preferences, shared virtues and common beliefs. Politicians also make claims about what it is that the purported constituency, and sometimes other audiences, want, and what they should, or might, do. By constructing those audiences as different collectivities, and through the claims made by other participants, the constituency which the would-be representative seeks to represent is transformed. In the next section, we address how the other half of this correspondence – how representatives' preferences, virtues and beliefs, and thus candidates themselves – are constructed.

Constructing candidates

Candidates are singled-out at rallies. At the rallies which we have analysed, successive acts build-up to the leading candidate's address in which rallies conventionally culminate. The audience waits in anticipation of this crowning event. At some rallies, this most senior candidate may be running for the presidency. At others, they may be running for a ward councillorship. Rallies are typically referred to as the most senior candidate's event, for instance, a rally addressed by Jacob Zuma becomes 'Zuma's rally'. When candidates take to the stage, they are figuratively, as well as usually literally, elevated above others.

Therefore, at rallies, the (leading) candidate is constructed, as noted by Paula Muñoz (2019). A persona is fashioned, in what Erving Goffman calls the presentation of self (1959). It may be the reiteration of a persona constructed at other places and times, but equally, rallies are often used to present personas tailored to the event and audience. Chief among the actors producing these personas is the candidate themselves. The minimal rally genre enables the candidate to address the audience directly. Candidates are not restricted to speaking to second parties as they are in the talk formats of interviews and debates that dominate radio and television media (Tolson, 2012). Nor are they trapped by the conventions of addressing themselves to no-one in particular inherent to newspaper opinion pieces. This format of direct address enables particular formats of self-presentation. It enables candidates to share their feelings with audiences directly. Zambian President Hakainde Hichilema, as an opposition candidate, explicitly introduced himself to rally audiences as, variously, an 'economist', 'businessman', 'farmer' or 'Bally' (and thus as a friendly father figure) (Beardsworth, 2020; Siachiwena, 2021). In a similar vein, direct address enables candidates to share

personal stories with audiences. Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe recounted to mass audiences a (so-called) patriotic history in which he was both witness and protagonist, and in so doing urged the audience to share his vision for an acceptable or desirable future (Lewanika, 2023). These first-person and first-hand narratives offer discursive opportunities to (re)write and (re)fashion presentations of self. More widely, direct address also enables candidates to make promises, make declarations and recount their achievements and in doing so fashion personas of which their opinions, beliefs, policy platforms and policy records are a part (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023).

Rallies equally afford candidates opportunities to present themselves through performative action. These embodied performances enable politicians to convey things in ways which texts alone do not. Some, like 2019 Malawian presidential candidate Saulos Chilima, do press-ups to display their masculinity. Others take to their knees in supplication to perform their piety or humility. Candidates frequently utilise props to enable a wider series of performances. Freeman Mbowe used his experience as a DJ to hold microphones in ways which projected youthfulness.

In particular, candidates use these performances to act-out identities. They sing or dance in styles which are pre-encoded to signify a particular identity. Indeed, in Africa's multi-ethnic societies the very choice of which language to speak in conveys identity. Bodies and clothes feed into these choices (as theorised in Vittorini, 2022). Many adorn themselves in the clothes of the constructed traditions of ethnicities to thus convey identity (Ademilokun & Olateju, 2016). Others don clothes in which their political identities are pre-encoded, such as the red berets favoured by disparate self-styled opposition radicals in South Africa (Economic Freedom Fighters), Uganda (National Unity Party) and Tanzania (Chadema). Others make more idiosyncratic identity choices. Nelson Chamisa, for example, wore all yellow to signify the new, golden dawn to which he would lead Zimbabwe. President Yoweri Museveni signifies his enduring commonness by wearing a broad-rimmed farmer's hat.

Many of these presentations of self by candidates are acted-out with other people. Candidates' piety and righteousness are performed through prayers made and blessings given by priests to candidates on-stage, often from several religions and denominations in turn (Deacon, 2015). Candidates can display their communal and patron relations by appearing with key religious, traditional or other local spokesmen, by being enthroned as community elders by co- and non-co-ethnics alike, by relating national plans to what that would mean at the local level, and by using the speeches of less prominent people to speak to some of the more contentious and potentially divisive issues (Beardsworth, 2020). Rallies also give candidates an opportunity to very publicly interact with other elites. In so doing candidates can, for example, display their status and allegiance (Lewanika, 2023), their popularity

by welcoming defectors (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023) and/or to position themselves for future interactions (Waddilove, 2023).

At the same time, candidates act-out relationships and interests with their immediate audiences. By coming to the rally, they have, at the very least, visited. They give gifts to audience members and express interest in audiences' wellbeing in displays of care, generosity (Kramon, 2017) and virtue (Cheeseman et al., 2021). Relatedly, promises and policy talk is a way to exhibit that candidates understand local problems. Campaign teams go to efforts to inform candidates about local issues precisely so that they can speak to them (Beardsworth, 2020; Lewanika, 2023; Lynch, 2023). Likewise, candidates make promises, field questions and even respond to requests live from the audience to display their accessibility (Roelofs, 2019). Tanzanian President Magufuli, for example, made a habit of accepting petitions from the crowd and taking action live on stage, such as dismissing errant officials there and then (Paget, 2023b). Equally, candidates can present themselves as a strong defender of community interests or a conciliatory character who can work across various ethnic or religious divides. At the same time, aspirants use media coverage of successive rallies to present themselves as candidates with a broad or even national support base (Muñoz, 2019; Wyatt, 2021)

Alongside these performances of track-record, promise, alliance and electoral viability are performances of hostility. Candidates construct themselves (and their enemies) by acting-out antagonisms with others on stage. Studies of contemporary far-right politicians in Western countries affirm how they use rallies to vilify not only electoral enemies, but a series of out-groups (Valcore et al., 2021). Of course, finding opponents to take the stage with is never easy. However, some aspirants launch attacks on absent opponents and their supporters (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023).

Candidates often make representative claims directly at rallies (see Paget, 2023c). They assert that they speak, fight or stand for audiences at rallies. We described above how representative claims are made plausible by constructing correspondences between representatives and constituencies. We examined how constituencies are constructed in search or in accordance with such alignments. Candidates too are constructed to fashion these alignments. Candidates present themselves as sharing the very affinities, experiences and opinions read into the constituents – or experiences to which audiences might sympathise or aspire. Candidates also gain representative status implicitly through the actions of audiences (see Paget, 2023c).

Constructing political contests

Rallies are organised to help construct candidates and constituencies; they are also organised to mobilise people to action – be that to turn out to vote (or not) and/or to protest (or not) – to help ensure that certain

individuals are (or are not) elected to office. In turn, a successful rally – in the interpretive frame which rally genre provides – is one that mobilises people to undertake political action: to support the party or candidate(s) that have organised the meeting and/or discourage an opponent and their supporters (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). As with collectivities and candidates, the electoral contest is ultimately co-produced however, by candidates, notables, media and audiences who – through reinforcements or clashes – construct a sense of key battle lines, prizes and likely outcomes.

The focus of this contest is often ‘the state’, which successful candidates will gain positions in, informal and formal powers from, and varying degrees of control over. Particularly in rural areas, the state might be made more present at rallies than at most other times. Take the issue of security. The visibility of police and other agencies at rallies helps to ‘broadcast state power’ (Herbst, 2000) and (re)produce the idea of a state that has omnipresent control over security and a monopoly over the legitimate use of violence, which elected politicians will then oversee with associated promises made of the stability that they will continue to ensure or bring. In turn, the electoral contest is imbued with particular urgency by the complex nature of the modern state as a set of institutions, processes and performances, which elected politicians – by dint of their position in the legislature or executive – can use to favour or disadvantage inclusive or particular collectivities. Rallies are used to (re)produce the idea of a state with capacities and wherewithal, which, if only the ‘right’ politician (s) can gain control over them, can realise multiple possibilities, and which, if the ‘wrong’ politicians win, can usher in marginalisation or worse. The urgency and importance of what is at stake is emphasised, in an attempt to move collectivities to political action (Lewanika, 2023; Wilkins & Vokes, 2023).

For rally organisers, candidates, and their supporters this sense of contest is constructed, at least in part, by implicit or explicit promises of what they can ‘continue to do’ or ‘change’ if they are ‘in power’. Such promises often consist of handouts and/or visions of development, plenitude, and a return to a previous golden era or the ushering in of order in a context of growing discontent. Such gifts and promises often go hand-in-hand with the stated or implied threat of disorder. Rallies themselves are often beset by issues of insecurity (Waddilove, 2023). They are periodically banned (Kwayu, 2023; Paget, 2021) or disrupted by organised hecklers, and sometimes by security services and non-state actors, often party cadres, paramilitaries or gangs. Even when such disruptions are not active, they remain latent, embodied in the bodyguards and security details that accompany leaders (Wilkins & Vokes, 2023). Rallies are also moments when leaders, their allies and supporters can make explicit or implicit threats about what will happen in the future – from the possibility that security services loyal to

the president and ruling party might deny the people's choice to the protests that the opposition might unleash on such an occasion.

Critically these promises and threats are usually interlinked with de-campaigns or negative narratives of what a candidate or party's main opponent(s) will do if they secure power. In this vein, candidates present states as directed – or as potentially directed – by wrong-headed leaders who chart courses for ruin, by self-enriching elites and/or by local or global power-structures intent on exploitation. In each iteration, the state is portrayed as a thing to be fought over and controlled, which can and will be abused by opponents.

In certain contexts, candidates and rally organisers ramp up this sense of competition by fostering a sense of potential exclusion and of politics as ethnic, regional, religious, generational and/or class based. In many countries, rally performances are littered with ethnic symbolism – from traditional dancers and songs to the involvement of traditional leaders. Candidates make a point of visiting different locations associated with particular ethnic groups and of tailoring their promises; they often make a point of referring to the support that they enjoy from other ethnic groups, making a point of appearing with key ethnic spokesmen or talking of their visits to, and reception in, different ethnic strongholds. In many cases, candidates present their campaign and party as multi-ethnic and their opponent as a 'tribalist' and ethnically biased (Lynch, 2011; Beardsworth, 2020).

More generally, these competitions are constructed not as mere election races between opposing parties, but as zero sum struggles between rival blocs which form 'us'/'them' divides (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). Their fights are not just important as a means to choose future leaders, but are located as moments of constructed crisis (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). In these moments, society is presented as standing on the threshold of realising either 'beatific' or 'horrific' futures (Glynos & Howarth, 2007): individual politicians can open the door to bright futures (and even to Canaan) or to chaos and misery (Cheeseman et al., 2021). The election is thus constituted in turn as a battle that *must* be won. This is done to spur the assembled – and secondary audiences beyond – into action or inaction to realise the vision constructed at the rally, to vanquish the opponent and usher in the vision of the bright, beatific future (Lewanika, 2023; Wilkins & Vokes, 2023).

As already noted however, it is not only candidates and rally organisers who help to construct electoral contests; audiences through their (un)enthusiastic turnout and responses and media coverage of the same also help to co-produce, trouble, or complicate the same. Thus, while the aim for rally organisers is to construct an image of a contest that they must win to bring about 'good' things and avert 'disaster', and a contest that they will win given their large and enthusiastic support base, such goals can easily go awry, for example, if audiences are relatively small, muted and/or openly dismissive.

Conclusion

The political messages crafted at rallies carry an abundance of meanings. Nevertheless, there are patterns in those meanings. These patterns are fixed in the rally genre. This genre consists, simultaneously, of an arrangement of units which are deployed at the rally and an interpretive framework which fixes what these units, in combination, signify. Co- and counter-producers draw on this genre as a template as they make rallies and make meanings at and through them. Audiences interpret what happens at rallies in reference to it. Substantively, this genre consists of the ritualised actions, repertoires of performance, symbols, arrangements of these things, and more besides, which are found across rallies. It foregrounds candidates, collectivities and contests, and elevates representative claim-making in their construction.

This article and special issue addresses research on political messages in Africa. We illustrate the variety in political messages that can be explored if analysts are not wedded to a Kitscheltian programmatic-clientelist framework. We join the calls for political communications in Africa to be rethought. We advocate interpreting political messages as discourses that carry variety in meaning, and rethinking rallies as key sites of producing and reproducing social and political worlds, and, in so doing, contribute to the growing body of work that interprets political messages.

Future research should pick-up where we leave off. We by no means argue that this article and the special issue it introduces exhaust the interpretation of meaning-making at and through rallies. We see our studies not as filling-in gaps in an otherwise saturated research topography, but carving-out new courses for future research from islands of prior research. The communications studies from which we draw our inspiration illustrates how much more there may be to analyse. Future research should, for example, study further the subgenres of rallies, the modes of talking and the repertoires of performing at rallies, how stage design is integrated into the production of the rally, and how rallies are covered by various media.

The time, effort and money used to produce rallies (Paget, 2023a) are also indicative of another important fact: the centrality of persuasion and perception to politics. Ruling parties in many electoral-authoritarian regimes still invest heavily in holding rallies. Those in Uganda, Zimbabwe and Tanzania are paramount examples. This points to something more fundamental in their utility and their centrality to the performative dimensions of politics, even in authoritarian contexts. Candidate's popularity levels and perceived characteristics and policies, the sense of constituency that is evoked and mobilised, and a sense of primary public interests – be it continuity, change, development, or security – are not pre-given, but are constructed over time and (re)produced, at least in part, through rallies.

We also hope that our research agenda will travel beyond scholarship of Africa. Rallies are significant modes of political communication in democracies – and autocracies – all over the world; they are also understudied across it. No doubt many aspects of the rally cultures and messages we study will prove particular to the places we study. Nevertheless, we expect that many others will travel well. We see in rallies elsewhere – not least in the United States – what we see in our African sites of study: the construction of the three C's and the making of representative claims.

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