



Kenyan Television Stand-up Comedy as a Reflection of Societal Mentality

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Abstract

The held mantra for comedy is laughing at ourselves, meaning that the jokes and situations highlighted by a stand-up comedian are a reflection of societal values and norms that may in turn be idiotic in nature but still held dear by the society. The norms maybe like a ritual that though at times ineffectual and at times detrimental is still held as a part of the societal code and cannot be discarded easily. Indeed the traditional venue of a typical stand-up comedian has been the pub, performing to an audience that is inebriated, but with the increased popularity of stand-up comedy in Kenyan television the audience has increased tenfold but the substance of the jokes is yet to be analysed in detail. This paper tries to look at the performances of different stand-up comedians in the Kenyan television while analysing the nature of their jokes in relations to the idiosyncrasies in society.



1.0 Introduction

Traditionally, stand-up comedy has been a live peer kind of theatre, which basically takes form as a humorous discourse that is intended to amuse. The comedian chooses his own path from several themes and tries to build a consensus between him and the audience. Television has to an extent removed this theatre from its original audience as it broadcasts the comedian from his/her setting to a wider audience outside his/her confines. Indeed, television stand-up comedy may to an extent be directed not for the audience watching it live at the studio but for the wider public watching from their homes. Stand-up comedy is a form of theatre meant to entertain more than inform or educate its audience. The traditional setting for stand-up comedy (the pub) does not provide a conducive environment for the dissemination of information or education of a people. The themes in stand-up comedy range from sex, art, music, race, culture, society, religion to infinity. However, because the stand-up comedian draws his/her material from the society, this material can point to the various idiosyncrasies that are part of the societal norms, hence, the education of the audience watching the performance. Indeed, one must at times look deeper than the mere words used by the comedian to appreciate the peculiarity of the societal norm he/she is pointing to. Seirlis (2011) while writing about the South African stand-up comedians notes that most comedians in the country derive their material from the prevailing social, political and economic conditions. The comedians justify their decision to concentrate on the society, politics and economy as they are a matter of life and death. Television stand-up comedy made a debut in Kenya in the 1990s with the *Redykyulass* group probably being the first and most successful stand-up comedy assemblage on television at the time. Although this show only contained aspects of stand-up comedy, it made the theatrical style popular and gave an opportunity for most of the now famous stand-up comedians in the country to showcase their talents. The group's main characters, John Kiarie, Tony Njuguna and Walter Mong'are based a majority their performances on major Kenyan political players at the time, social issues and other skits meant to entertain. A simple plot of the political performance, taken from one of their episodes is outlined below:

The segment of the show starts with a voice over and title introducing it as the *Opraah Winfree Show*, then Tony Njuguna (a man) walks in dressed like a lady and using a feminine voice introduces herself as Opraah Winfree. She proceeds to introduce her guest as a president from a certain tiny country in Kenya, which indicates the cue for Walter Mong'are (playing Daniel Arap Moi) to walk in. Mong'are first of all complains about the security people touching (searching) him as he came to the show and uses a Kiswahili word *Isipokua* (except) in his complaint, a word that Njuguna (playing Opraah) does not understand and inquires about it. She then asks what the president's major achievement has been in his presidency, in which he replies that in 1978 he introduced *Maziwa ya Nyayo* (provision of free milk to primary school pupils). Opraah then enquires whether the school milk is still provided to pupils and the president replies that it is not done anymore for the simple reason that the children grew up. She then questions the president on the

other hallmarks of his presidency, where he replies that when he came to power the system of election was secret ballot but he changed that to *Mlolongo* and explains that it is a system of election where a man stands behind another, with another man following until there is a lady who can also stand behind the men. Opraah does not get the explanation and probes some more on what exactly it entails, in which the president says that he has even introduced another electoral system referred to as *democratisation of noise*, in short called *acclamation*. The host asks how this system of election works and the president replies that Americans might even understand it better because when he sees Puff Daddy and Jah Rule performing they tell people to put their hands in the air and say yeee, yeee, *ohhh*, and that is *acclamation*, that is the way you are elected. Opraah then asks that if given a second chance, what would he do differently. The president gets sentimental and says that he feels that he let his boy down (referring to Joseph Kamotho - former secretary general of the then ruling party, KANU). This launches the next segment of the show where the characters perform a song. The extract clearly demarcates itself into addressing the legacy of the former president. At the end of the interview, it is clear that the president did not achieve much as his greatest triumph was the provision of free milk to primary school pupils – an achievement that in fact did not last as the programme was discontinued by the end of his presidency. The hallmark of his presidency was the introduction of queue voting system that he says he has in fact advanced to the new system he calls the democratisation of noise or acclamation.

The show drew its material from the political reality as both the milk programme and queue voting system were introduced by the former President Daniel Arap Moi and were discontinued after their perceived purpose were accomplished. The free milk for school programme was geared to help boost enrolment in primary schools across the country, but whose success has yet to be fully documented. On the one hand, the milk programme was indeed a worthwhile course as it highlighted the importance the political leadership placed on education at the time. The 1988 queue voting system on the other hand was one of the greatest political disasters in the voting history of Kenya. Throup (1993) points out that since President Moi came to power, elections have become increasingly expensive, violent and ‘rigged’. He states that the 1988 election was the most ‘rigged’ in Kenya’s history. Two years earlier, KANU (the then *de jure* sole party) had abandoned the secret ballot in the parliamentary primary in preference for ‘African democracy’. Voters had to queue behind the candidate of their choice or his nominee at a series of locational meeting spots, clearly revealing their political preference to their neighbours and local officials.

The comedians recognise the inanity of the queue voting system and suggest an even more ridiculous voting system they refer to as democratisation of noise and by the president pointing out to popular musicians at the time as an example of how the system is supposed to work just adds to the absurdity of the idea. The skit suggests that even though we have a system of election (that is determined by the political leadership) the whole country is held hostage by politicians led by the president who determines what to

offer and what not to offer to the citizens who do not have a choice in the matter. Indeed the president can decide that elections would be held by acclamation and that would be the end of the matter. As the audience laughs at the ridiculous suggestion of voting by acclamation, they must also reflect on the 1988 queue voting and how it came about. A close look at the outlined segment reveals that the comedians expose the ignorance of not only the president but also of the show's host. The host does not seem to know where Kenya is in relation to Africa and also appears condescending to the guest. The manner in which she asks the questions and her general expression indicates that she regards her guest as a simpleton. However, the guest does not challenge this perception as his command of language and the weird answers he gives to the questions posed confirm his idiocy.

In 2002, *Redykyulass* was replaced by *Red Corner*, which saw the emergence of new artists performing in conjunction with the *Redykyulass* crew. The lead comedians in *Red Corner* were Peter Kaimenyi, Danel Ndambuki and Maurice Ochieng. *Red Corner's* performers appeared as individuals on stage telling jokes to an audience, unlike the *Redykyulass* ensemble where the performances were group acts. Indeed the performance in *Red Corner* conform to the traditional definition of stand-up comedy; an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience (Mintz, 1985). The artists in *Red Corner* employed the same model as outlined by the *Redykyulass* crew as their performances were more of a narration of jokes than the building of a comic scenario that culminates into a hilarious event. Furthermore, the comedians did not integrate a presiding theme that governs their performance, hence, a performance was about everything that a comedian had prepared or might think about while on stage. However, the jokes told at times did touch on important social issues that the audience at times accept as a social reality but rarely takes time to think about deeply. A joke about an explanation by a police officer on a shootout between the law enforcers and criminals performed by Maurice Ochieng (stage name; Mdomo Baggy) in one of his *Red Corner* appearances demonstrates this point:

'We all know the story of the police. The suspect was running this way (demonstrates by swinging his hand from the stage back to the stage front), he fired bullets this way (swings his hand from the stage front to the stage back), my boys (the police) returned fire this way (swings his hand from the stage left to the stage right), hit the suspect that way (swings his hand from the stage right to the stage left), and the suspect died. We are carrying out investigations, anybody with information to come forward. Will you go? Tomorrow in the papers if you went you will be trapped and we will hear the police say that the dead suspect led us to their hideout and we found another suspect.'

The performance is a caricature of a police explanation as usually seen on television news where the explanation given to the death of an alleged criminal does not make sense. The comedian represents the police as an institution that is run unprofessionally, does shoddy investigations and more of a danger to the society than a beneficial entity. The comedian tries to point out in the skit that the police most likely killed a civilian who was in fact way out of the cross fire but unlucky enough to be in the vicinity of the shootout. He goes ahead to suggest that only a fool will volunteer information to the police on criminal activity, as he/she is likely to be implicated as being part of the criminal gang that he/she set out to report. The street perception of the Kenyan police is indeed reflected in the skit, with the police being taken to be more of an enemy to society than a friend. The skit performed by Maurice Ochieng can be related to a similar one done on location by the *Redykyulass* ensemble. The skit is cast as part of a newscast where reporters are on location at a scene of a shootout as outlined below:

Kiari (taking on a police officer character) on a ridiculous looking police radio is seen bragging to his superiors how he was the one who shot down the suspect, who can be seen lying on the ground (presumably dead) with a machete next to him. The camera moves to Njuguna (cast as a senior police officer in uniform) who explains the shootout; “As you can see ehh! My men were around and challenged him to stop, he challenged them not to stop. So! They decided to challenge him more and he challenged them back, and so what my men did then was ehh! They opened (thinks better of it and changes the statement), he opened fire on my officers, and my officers returned the fire since the fire doesn’t belong to them anyway because my officers have their own fire. He decided he will still give them back the fire, and my officers insisted with more of their fire. He finally accepted the fire, he took it in like a man and that is how he fell down.” The camera moves to Kiari who can be seen busy taking the fingerprints of the man lying on the ground by dipping them on the muddy soil and pasting them on a piece of paper. Njuguna approaches a car next to the shot suspect and directs Kiari to also dust the door of the vehicle for fingerprints while touching the same door in a bid to demonstrate what he wants done. The shot suspect suddenly rises up and takes off leading to a chase. Njoroge can be seen shouting on a police radio that the suspect has vomited the fire given to him and requests for backup.

The police in both skits have been depicted as fools who don’t really know what they are doing. They also seem to be keen in explaining their actions on television in a bid to mislead the public and show that they are trying their best to control crime. Indeed, the Commonwealth Human Rights initiative 2006 report on the police service in Kenya states that Kenya’s men and women associate the police with impunity, secrecy and violence.

Hence, the perception that the Kenya police is a violent body is not a unique feature in the comic act, it is the daft attempts by the police to explain the violence that is unique. The language used when depicting the police also shows the low levels of education that officers in the police service have. The poor command in language makes the explanations to the violence in their acts look ridiculous. In Maurice Ochieng's act, he used his hands to communicate the explanation and show the absurdity of the police officer's words. The Kenyan police is perceived to be one of the most notorious arm of government that one stand-up comedy group known as *Serykaly* (corruption of the word government) exclusively performs the police in their comic acts. Although comic acts that have a specific theme such as *Serykaly's* act is a rarity in Kenya, comic acts such as Carol Tharau (stage name; Wanjiku Mwalimu wa Kiswahili – Wanjiku the Kiswahili teacher) and Fred Omondi with his poetry lines and music rhymes are trying to redefine the style of stand-up comedy in the country. However, it is easy to note that though Omondi and Tharau have a unique style that often sticks to an issue, they do not analyse the issue in depth. Their style is mainly to give them an identity and an edge over competing acts.

Douglas (cited in Mintz, 1985) emphasizes that the context and process of joke telling are at least as important as the texts of the jokes themselves to any understanding of the meaning of humour. The joke form rarely lies in the utterance alone, but can be identified in the total social situation. Douglas further concerns herself with the joking activity as 'rite' and 'anti-rite', or as public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs and as a re-examination of those beliefs. She notes that the structure of jokes tends to be subversive, in other words, jokes tear down, distort, misrepresent, and reorder usual patterns of expression and perception. Considering the Kenyan stand-up comedy acts, this element of jokes being subversive to the norms held by society is not fully exploited. Corruption by the political and business class and rising poverty levels are important issues that stand-up comedians have kept away from. It is a fact that stand-up comedy shows aired on television are meant for the basic function of entertainment, as a result of this narrow perception of what stand-up comedy is, it has failed to look at issues affecting the society critically.

Mintz (1985) opines that the key to understanding the role of stand-up comedy in the process of cultural affirmation and subversion is in the recognition of the comedian's traditional 'license' for deviate behaviour and expression. It is in this sense that a comedian may pose a serious issue in his/her act but still manages to raise a laugh from his/her audience by slanting the issue in a light manner that shows a different slant to its interpretation. It is in this regard that the *Redykyulass* ensemble could do a skit on the president and his government and not face any repercussions, or the *Serykaly* crew could publicly ridicule the police service and get away with it. Olliar and Sprigman (2008) compare the style in stand-up comedy in the United States of America by noting that in the post-vaudeville era comedians invested greatly in performance but very little in innovative texts. This is in contrast to the current situation where text is much more appropriable margin. The authors note that whereas jokes in the former era tended to

plow through established and generic themes (for instance, mother-in-law jokes or ethnic jokes), humour in the latter era tends to be more personal, observational and point-of-view driven. In Kenya, all television stand-up comedy programmes are variety shows featuring a number of performing comedians taking turns on the same stage. Most of the shows are shot on location (a hall/restaurant, etc, with a live audience) and later edited for television. Shows like *Redykyulass* depended on the comic exchange between the actors performing, while others like *Red Corner*, *Churchill live*, *Crazy Comedy*, *Top Comic*, *Lough out Laud* etc, call for individual artists performing independent acts. *Hawayu* by Erick Omondi saw the stand-up comic trying to do a one man act, but the concept failed after airing for a few weeks. The most obvious factor that could be attributed to the failure is that the quality of the jokes and performance in general faltered with each episode as the comic could not muster enough material to present in a weekly show. The first season of *Churchill Live* also saw the host, Daniel Ndambuki, performing alone on stage. However, the second season saw the producers including other stand-up comedians alongside Ndambuki in order to keep the show entertaining. The variety setup of the Stand-up comedy shows points to the fact that original text for a performance is indeed hard to be formulated, hence, the multiplicity of talent for a show.

However, even with different stand-up comedians coming fore to display their talent, the richness of text has not developed to an intellectual level that would require an audience to laugh, and at the same time think of the issue presented in a different point of view. Most of the jokes told are centred on girl-boy relationship issues, a concept that has proved to be popular with the audience such that Kenyan contemporary popular theatre has been reduced to the same theme. While discussing the stand-up comic's audience, Seizer (2011) notes that the audience hopes that a comics' act will carry them laughing, beyond polite formality and into the idiosyncratic realities of adult life, conveyed as they are through speech that is markedly self-referential and exaggeratedly frank, and often intimate to the point of being confessional. Although Seizer does not define what she means by the term idiosyncratic realities of adult life, the clause can be taken to refer to all that encompasses the realities of life.

Seizer (2011) in her paper points out that a comedians audience is not a homogenous group that expects the same thing from the performance, but a group of people with differing levels of intelligence, exposure and demands. In this respect, a comedian can either develop a consistent style that appeals to part of the audience who forms his/her core viewers, or he/she can present a variety of scenarios and jokes that attempts to appeal to a variety of viewers. Although the comedians may touch on an important theme once in a while or in one section of an act, they do not advance the theme to a level where one questions the social concern. The acts are mainly meant for audiences that do not look at the performance critically, or that with hopes for self advancement at the end of the performance. As much as *Redykyulass* or *Serykaly* might make the police service look crude in their skits, the intellect accompanying the performance is superficial. Comparing these acts to a skit such as Rowan Atkinson's *A*

Devil Called Toby, the Kenyan stand-up comedian's performance would seem artificial and lacking in depth. In *A Devil Called Toby*, Atkinson's performance reveals religion to be a gamble and goes on to question the whole concept of Hell (and inline, Heaven). Such material would ordinarily be considered to be an insult (blasphemy) to Christians, and indeed to anyone who believes in a supernatural being, as it tears down the whole concept of religion and exposes it as superstition. In his performance, Atkinson does not point out to the follies of religion blandly, but implies them in his skit for the more intelligent persons who are willing to face the underlying message.

In Kenya, the stand-up comics' performances are stagnant at the superficial level with most comedians failing to come up with meticulous acts that demand a deeper psychological engagement by the audience. The stand-up comedians seem to be stuck in a rut with boy-girl relationship issues and ethnicity being their main focus. Nonetheless, this restricted source of material for the stand-up comic can be justified as being what the audience appreciates as it draws laughter every time a comedian uses romantic relationships or ethnicity as his/her main focus. Indeed, Charney (1978) notes that comedy is an art of persuasion, that tries to move its auditors to laughter, which is the proper end of comedy. However, Lewis (1969) notes that art, whether it be theatre, opera, sculpture, dance, or collage, is social, its direction affects the future of the world just as much as the deposition of the Bomb. He opines that all theatre has something to say, a message of one kind or another, be it direct or oblique, a shout or a sigh. Hence, however much stand-up comedy is geared to laughter; it has to have an underlying message so as to remain relevant to society. Considering Lewis' statement, Stand-up comedy on Kenyan television seems to be directing the attention of the nation to trite and avoiding issues in society that should be highlighted. Although Charney (1978) gives a very simple definition of comedy by pointing out its aim, he also points to Socrates as a great comic martyr because of his dedication to the truth and the risk of his life, hence pointing out to the comedian's role of representing the truths in society even in humour. It can also be argued that the audience enjoys the current stand-up comedy acts because they have not been exposed to better.

In conclusion, although some Kenyan stand-up comedy ensembles have tried making their performances about issues and even concentrate on certain organisations that render themselves to ridicule, the fact is that the performances are not memorable or worthy of in-depth thought. Stand-up comedy in the country is a free for all event where an individual who fancies him/herself as funny can make an appearance due to the competitive nature of the theatre, but this lends the theatrical genre to trite and irrelevancies. Most comedians go with the tried and tested kind of jokes; hence, they end up sticking to the same rote of boy-girl relationships and ethnic stereotypes that are so common in stand-up comedy. This is at the expense of social issues that can be explored in stand-up comedy with an end of amusing but still challenges the audience intellectually.

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