



Who's Laughing Now? Satire as a Form of Social Protest

By Wandia Njoya



Those of you who are my age or older might remember when the musician Eric Wainaina came onto the scene in the late nineties with his song "[Nchi ya kitu kidogo](#)." For those of you who might not know the song, it was an attack against corruption in the civil service and a lament about the lack of public social services for ordinary wananchi. The song was a play on Kenyan code words for theft of public resources, namely "*chai*" (tea) and "*kitu kidogo*" (something small). In the song, the singer tells a woman, "*Ukitaka chai ewe mama, nunua Ketepa* (If you want tea, buy Ketepa [a famous local tea brand]), and tells someone else, "*Ukitaka chai ewe ndungu, nenda Limuru*" (If you want tea, go to Limuru [one of the tea-growing areas in Kenya]). The singer also boldly says to a policeman, "*Ukitaka soda ewe inspekta, burudika na Fanta*" (If you want soda, refresh yourself with Fanta).

The song was fun to sing, because of its benga beat, and the fact that its theme was close to Kenyans' hearts. The rhyming in Kiswahili (mama/Ketepa, ndungu/Limuru, inspekta/Fanta), made the song even more enjoyable. Not surprisingly, while the song was a popular hit among the people, it was not popular among politicians. In 2001, the [BBC reported](#) that Eric was almost prevented from performing the song at an event attended by the then vice president George Saitoti, but the public prevailed.

Later, I read an interview in which Eric recounted a true story about the impact of his song. There

was a bus with high school students that was stopped on the road by the police, and the students began to sing “*Ukitaka soda ewe inspekta, burudika na Fanta.*” The police officers were infuriated, and promptly arrested the students who spent the night at the local police station.

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The second funny element of Eric Wainana’s song that I’d like to mention is the comedy group Redykyulass, which performed some pieces in Eric’s album “Sawa Sawa” in which the song “*Nchi ya kitu kidogo*” appeared. I will never forget what an impression Redykyulass made on us when it burst onto the scene in the nineties, with comedian Walter “Nyambane” Mongare doing his classical performance of President Daniel arap Moi, with lines like “*na hiyo, ni maendeleo*” (and this, is development).

Nyambane’s imitation of Moi has remained as fresh as ever. He is so good at parodying Moi that even less than a year ago, the [Churchill](#) and [Jeff Koinange](#) TV shows in Kenya and even government officials in charge of entertainment for the [national celebrations](#), pulled him out of his posh Nairobi County communication director’s job to perform parodies of Moi, who has been out of power for almost fifteen years.

For me, these opportunities for Nyambane to still perform his Moi routine are interesting, not least because there is now a generation of Kenyans that does not remember, or has not experienced, the significance of Moi in Kenya’s public consciousness. And yet, Nyambane’s parody still has appeal.

Moi has been succeeded by two presidents. During their tenure, we have gone through major pleasant and unpleasant landmarks. We have had post-election violence and a government with a prime minister. We have had a new constitution that has given us counties and devolution, with a president who is still trying to run a tight hold on governors the way his mentor, Moi, held a tight grip on MPs and politicians. Many of the children who were born in the last decade of Moi’s rule are now over twenty. Laughing at a Nyambane routine today is like Americans laughing at Bill Clinton when there’s Donald Trump today, and George W. Bush and Obama in-between.

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So why does Nyambane’s Moi routine still have a soft spot in our hearts? Why do we have no memorable equivalent today for Uhuru Kenyatta, for example? The answer to this question is tied to the nature of politics and satire. Before I get to that, I’d just like to go over a few basics about satire.

Basics of satire

Satire is a very delicate genre. What may make people laugh today may not make them laugh tomorrow if the social living conditions have changed. In fact, scholarship avoids discussing satire because the genre is very difficult to pin down.

Satire tells a story as an analogy, and through that analogy, the audience is supposed to understand that the satirist is referring to a particular element in real life. For instance, when all the NASA

politicians portrayed on the [XYZ show](#) decide in which rooms of the house they will sleep, the analogy becomes a reflection of the intricate agreements that the principals negotiated to come up with a flag bearer. Because of its component of analogy, satire often doesn't appeal to people outside the community who may not be familiar with the analogy.

Great satire often arises during times of great repression or moral decadence. The satirist is said to be disturbed by the contradictions between ideals and morality, on the one hand, and the reality of political and moral decadence, on the other. The satirist who uses humour to ridicule and criticise society or those in power is holding up a mirror to society to provoke it to change the situation. This means that the satirist must experience a level of indignation and moral impatience with the subject he or she chooses to satirise. We see this especially in Patrick Gathara's and Godfrey Mwampembwa (better known as Gado)'s cartoons.

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Because satire attacks indirectly, the humour provoked by satire provides a way out for both the audience and the artist. When the audience laughs, it experiences relief, otherwise known as catharsis, which gives it a break from the pain of the absurdity of the oppression it deals with in real life. For the artists, satire provides a convenient cover in case they are attacked by the real-life targets of their ridicule. The artist can say to the target: "It was not about you; it was just a story."

But the escape route that satire provides is a double edged sword; while the catharsis of satire can soothe the pain of the audience, it often runs the danger of just providing catharsis without spurring the politicians or society to change their ways. In other words, people can take refuge in satire to avoid demanding social change. When they laugh, they feel better, but they go straight back into the lion's den for another bashing before they seek the next shot of relief through satire.

Although satire often does not provoke social change, politicians still fear it. For example, in the case of Ezekiel Mutua's evident pain about being satirised in his fight to install a censorship bill, we have seen that the political class is definitely uncomfortable about satire. And people in power do have a reason to fear satire, because satire warns people of social rot or impending danger, keeps the people vigilant about those in power, and makes people ask questions. Satire also provides a sense of moral superiority, because those who laugh at satire feel morally superior to the leaders who oppress them.

We need to understand these elements of satire to grasp why the satire about the Moi era (or error) is still quite funny for us older folk.

Why satirising Moi was funny

Moi was our president for 24 years, so he left an indelible mark on an entire generation. More importantly, Moi was omnipresent in Kenyans' lives. He was on the news every day; every news bulletin began with "*Mtukufu, rais Daniel arap Moi, leo ...*" (Today President Daniel arap Moi...). Moi's inescapable presence in our lives also meant that we had time to master his accent, his famous phrases and his mannerisms. So when Nyambane performed, there was an element of familiarity with the subject, and most of all, a shared communal experience. Nyambane's routine provided us with an opportunity to reminisce collectively about a difficult period in Kenya's history. But our laughter was also full sadness for the people who suffered under Moi's regime.

Kenyan artists need to be wary about comedy that purports to fulfil the functions of satire. In fact, the expanded freedoms we earned from the struggles of the nineties have resulted in less sophisticated forms of satire. But does this limited form of satire mean that there is no repression, no exploitation, and no one to mock and ridicule?

As I've already indicated, the media contributed to Moi's notoriety. It was not simply that Moi dominated the news bulletin on VoK (Voice of Kenya, which later became Kenya Broadcasting Corporation or KBC), but also that for most of the time that he was president, we had only one media channel. Unlike my generation, children today have not experienced a time when there was only one broadcast channel that went on air from 4pm to 11 pm during the week, and from 2pm to midnight over the weekends, with a brief shutdown in the afternoon. Moi was in our faces and ears all the time. We not only heard about him, we also sang songs about him like "*Tawala Kenya tawala*" ("Rule Kenya rule"). By laughing at parodies of Moi, we were able to distance ourselves from the man who had imposed himself on our lives.

Most important of all, making fun of Moi gave us a break from the repression of his regime, which was tangible. When Nyambane performed in the nineties, our laughter was more nervous than it is today. We knew that for having an opinion other than what Moi allowed, people could be assassinated, detained, tortured in the Nyayo House chambers or sent into exile.

One of the victims of that regime included columnist Wahome Mutahi, also known as Whispers, who was picked up from the Nation newspaper's offices and detained for "whispering too loudly". Laughing at Moi was a cardinal sin with life and death repercussions. So when we laughed at Redykyulass, or when we sang "*Nchi ya kitu kidogo*," we were releasing decades of repression. It was relief, or catharsis, for us. And even now when I watch Redykyulass, I still feel that catharsis. Because the memory of that oppression remains very fresh for me.

Changing times

The Redykyulass model of humour, which even Daniel "Churchill" Ndambuki admits is the model adopted by Kenya's comedy performances today, arose in specific times that have now radically changed. We now have the Internet and access to literally limitless media. We have a new constitution and more freedoms. We can criticise the president in public, and even to his face, and still go home and eat and drink with our families the same evening. And most of all, we don't have a president for longer than ten years, so thankfully, we will never be as familiar with another Kenyan president as we were with Moi.

And yet Kenyan satire, for the most part, hasn't changed. We are still mimicking politicians and the quirkiness of Kenyan society. Thankfully, comedians are now working on using less ethnic stereotypes than they did ten years ago, but there is still too much reliance on ethnic particularities for humour. And today, politicians are no longer as present on the live comedy stage. Even when they do appear, the comedy is based on mere imitation of the political personalities, but without an analogy of real, complex and disturbing socio-political issues.

I must admit that my knowledge of Kenyan comedy is scanty, but I have not seen, for example, good satire on marginalisation or gender discrimination in Kenya. I'm thinking of, for example, a skit on "mansplaining" that was done by [Jimmy Kimmel](#) and then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton that mocked the condescending attitudes towards women. Kimmel's enactment of sexism impressively captured the impossible standards that women are subjected to. But that kind of performance requires an intricate understanding of the issues that women face.

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In the Kenyan context, for example, we do not have enough comic performances that capture intricate social issues that require commentary, partly because dominant public discourses in Kenya reduce artistic skill to raw talent. An exception is the [XYZ show](#), which performed a brilliant skit satirising the racial [politics of conservation](#) by presenting a Maasai who settles in the UK to save British wildlife.

Without similar insights into the intricacy of social issues, the comedy that is now dominant in Kenyan entertainment will inevitably equate stupidity with ethnic peculiarities. And the comedy will rarely be satire, because the goal of the performance is simply to entertain and make people laugh, rather than to point out our moral weaknesses or political mistakes.

In other words, Kenyan artists need to be wary about comedy that purports to fulfil the functions of satire. In fact, the expanded freedoms we earned from the struggles of the nineties have resulted in less sophisticated forms of satire. But does this limited form of satire mean that there is no repression, no exploitation, and no one to mock and ridicule?

This question has actually become more prominent in the United States, especially with the election of Donald Trump. The comedy programmes mocking Trump have increased, and now America is experiencing the threat of comedy [overthrowing](#) authentic political discussion and engagement. And yet, [comedy](#) is part of what got Trump into power in the first place. A few years ago, John Oliver thought that the idea of Trump running for president [was so ridiculous](#) that he offered to campaign for Trump. The media gave Trump free airtime because he was [funny and entertaining](#). By the time the media and comedians realised what they’d done, Trump was on his way to becoming president.

And in the shock and despair, the American media has raised the amount of comedy on the airwaves. Even respectable channels like CNN have resorted to drama - bantering between the left and the right - as a form of political commentary. The problem is that comedy and melodrama do not engage citizens in authentic political discussions about their country.

For this reason, observers have started to ask whether mimicking and mocking Trump serves the social good any more. A few months ago, [Emma Burnell](#) wrote a piece in the British newspaper, *The Independent*, titled “Traditional political satire is dead - the people, not politicians, should be the butt of our jokes now.” She argued that political satire no longer challenges the establishment. Like in the case of Kenya, mocking politicians no longer has the shock effect it used to. Politicians are now more attentive to the people because they can be fired by the vote. Burnell argues that maybe it’s the people, not their leaders, who need to be mocked.

From Trump to Uhuru to Sonko, politicians tell us that they are the victims of oppression by the media, the international community or the government, and because we used to be the victims of the same, we believe we’re in the same boat as these politicians. But in reality, they’re screwing our hospitals and schools as they seek treatment abroad and send their kids to private schools.

I disagree with Burnell because I believe that satire should be reserved for those in power. Nevertheless, I concede her point that we the people are complicit in the current decay in our

countries. But in Kenya, wananchi are complicit in this decay as victims, not as perpetrators. More than that, the fact remains that oppression has not disappeared; it has simply morphed. We have a president who is privatising our health care and education, who is destroying institutions by underfunding them and making professionalism almost impossible, and who is sustaining criminal impunity by subverting judicial processes and by allowing thieves of public funds to run for public office. The national debt has shot through the roof over a project whose value to Kenya is not evident. Surely satire should have something to say about these serious issues.

However, satirising these issues is not so easy because the oppression has become more subtle, even though it is more viscous. Oppression is now embedded in law and policy, while, ironically, politicians speak freedom using the metaphors of the poor. Take, for instance, politician Mike Sonko, who talks as if he is more oppressed than the regular Kenyan, and who takes his fight for the people to the streets through personalised rescue missions, rather than to through the corridors of legislature where he was elected to represent the people's interests.

In an interview with Kimani wa Wanjiru a few years ago, the cartoonist Paul Kelemba, popularly known as [Maddo](#), captured the irony of the powerful claiming the position of the oppressed and explained its direct implication for satirists. Despite the increased liberties, said Kelemba, satirising is actually more difficult today for Kenyan artists than it was during Moi's days. "Incredulously, while we cartoonists struggled to bash politicians in the Kanu era, we've found criticising today's political leaders tricky because they always rush to court. It's a bit like they are the ones who are supposed to be the sole beneficiaries of today's freedoms. They have discovered that they can sue."

Maddo highlights an interesting phenomenon of this neoliberal era: the politicians have now become the oppressed fighting for freedom. They join us on the streets, they come to hospitals to pay for the treatment of our wounds caused by the government, they intervene in distress, and they complain that the government is oppressing them. From Trump to Uhuru to Sonko, politicians tell us that they are the victims of oppression by the media, the international community or the government, and because we used to be the victims of the same, we believe we're in the same boat as these politicians. But in reality, they're screwing our hospitals and schools as they seek treatment abroad and send their kids to private schools.

Another example is that of the current reforms in education, which are so problematic. Until recently, the education cabinet secretary Fred Matiang'i could do no wrong because of his yet-to-be-explained purge of cheating in national examinations. It is, therefore, very difficult for Kenyans to complain about the education reforms, and it does not help that every time he speaks, he seems to be enforcing efficiency in the education system. However, listening to him, it's very difficult to notice that actually, the cabinet secretary does not say much that is substantial. For instance, at the launch of the piloting of the new school curriculum, he used all the necessary buzz words about supporting schools and holding consultations on the reforms, but in fact, he never got to actually spell out what the reforms were. It is very difficult to point out these gaps without having to deal with accusations of being so "negative" and of refusing to support a hardworking minister. But in the midst of my struggles to explain why the reforms must be opposed, [Gado](#), in a single cartoon, explained everything I had been trying to say.

It is clear that oppression has not reduced; it is simply wrapped in a new garment. This reality suggests that we must change the way we satirise. We can no longer rely on just mimicking politicians. So in these changing times, how can we satirise? How do we make fun of policy, or expose political wolves in sheepskin? How do we: 1) warn the people; 2) keep the people always vigilant against those in power; 3) make people ask questions; and 4) give people a sense of encouragement? These are the questions that satirists today have a difficult job answering, especially because they can no longer answer these questions in the same way that Nyambane did.

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