

# perspectives

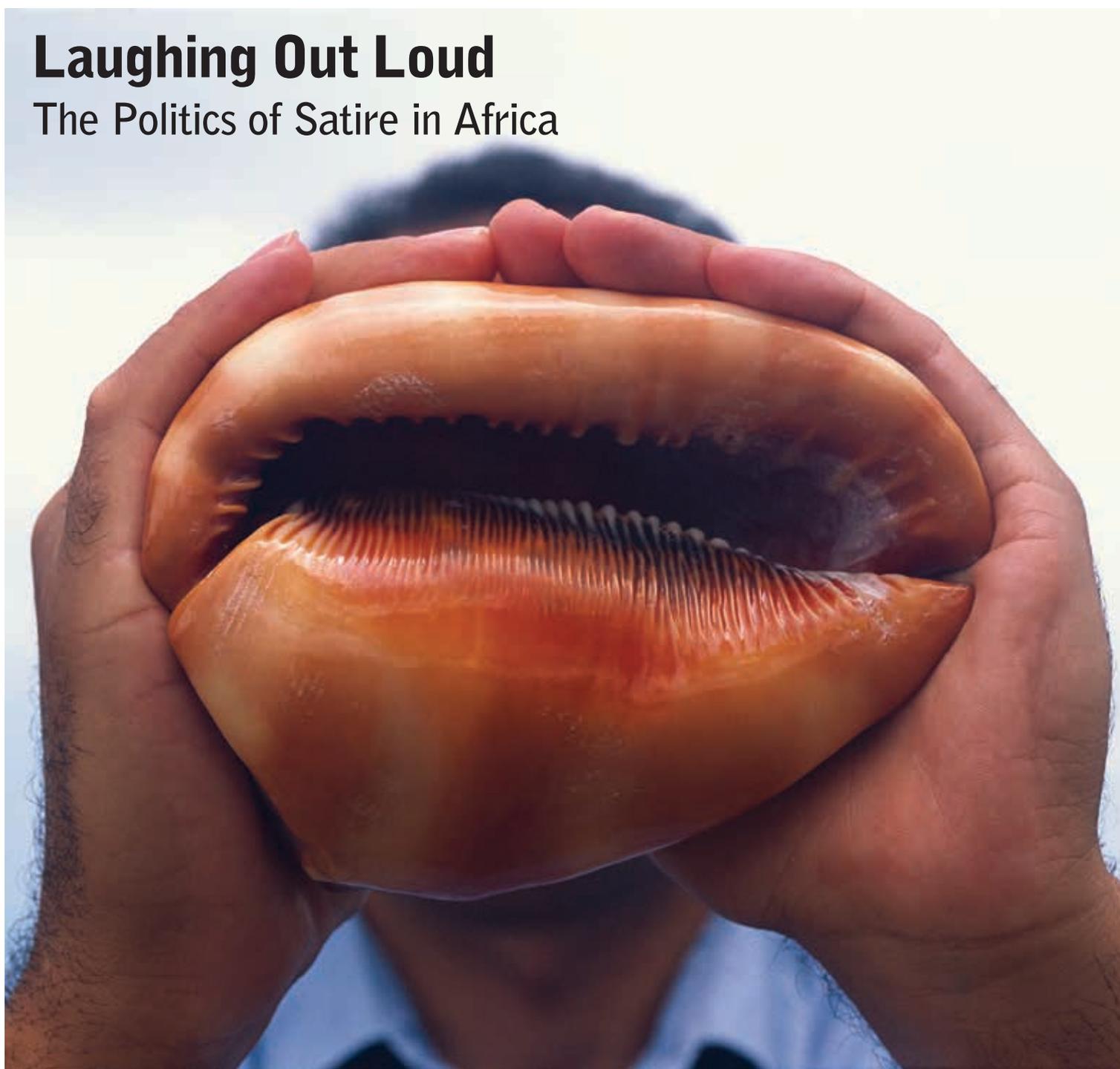
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POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

## AFRICA

### Laughing Out Loud

The Politics of Satire in Africa



This edition of **Perspectives Africa** is published jointly by the offices of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in sub-Saharan Africa.



## Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is a publicly funded institution that is affiliated with but intellectually independent from the German Green party. From our headquarters in Berlin and 30 overseas offices, we promote civic participation in Germany, as well as in more than 60 countries worldwide. Our work in Africa concentrates on promoting civil society, democratic structures, gender democracy and global justice. Together with our partners, we work toward conflict prevention and search for solutions to the challenges of environmental degradation and the depletion of resources. To achieve these goals, we rely on disseminating information, creating a deeper understanding between actors in Africa and Europe, and supporting global dialogue.

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# Editorial

When you write about Africa, make sure to always include sad and starving characters, advises Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainana in his famously ironic essay “How to write about Africa”, which takes aim at Western prejudices. He adds, “Avoid having the African characters laugh, or struggle to educate their kids, or just make do in mundane circumstances”.

In the same way that everyday laughter has been excluded from all-too-familiar depictions of the continent, African humour and satire as a form of social and political engagement remains underexplored. Although it may not always enjoy the same recognition as in other regions around the world, Africa does have a longstanding satirical tradition. The role of the praise singer, such as the *imbongi* in Southern Africa or the *griot* in parts of West Africa, has been compared to that of the ancient Greek comedy playwright or the medieval court jester: a figure who entertains but also speaks truth to power by using humour to present views that would otherwise not be tolerated. Today, South African Trevor Noah’s stint as host of *The Daily Show*, the political cartoons of East Africa’s Godfrey Mwampembwa (otherwise known as Gado), and internationally successful Nollywood films show that satire is alive and vibrant across the continent.

However, African satire has never had an easy existence. In many parts of the continent, criminal charges – or at least the threat of them – for insult and defamation are

commonplace and have a negative effect on free expression. Even in South Africa, probably the continent’s most vibrant democracy, satire faces serious backlash from those in power. For example, President Jacob Zuma sued political cartoonist Zapiro for defamation, although charges were eventually dropped; the satirical news website hayibo.com had to shut down, in part due to a lack of advertising from corporates who wanted to play it safe with government; and Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande called for an “insult law” following the exhibition of a painting by local artist Brett Murray that depicted Zuma with his genitals exposed.

Jesters, at once powerful and fragile, have always been subject to punishment when the royal sense of humour failed. However, as Samm Farai Monro from Zimbabwe’s satirical *Zambezi News* puts it, “you can’t kill satire because you can’t kill people’s sense of humour and their sense of justice”. The popularity of *Zambezi News* is itself a notable example of how social media has fundamentally changed the playing field, especially in repressive political contexts. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube explode with satirical writing and pictures as professional comedians and ordinary citizens alike creatively reinterpret the politics of the day. The court jester is not a lone figure anymore; today there are many.

Satire may not necessarily change politics but, as most articles in this edition illustrate, it is a powerful tool to undermine

propaganda, expose abuses of power, and ridicule cultural and social taboos. As with any form of power, however, satire comes with its own dangers and dark sides. As Sisonke Msimang reminds us: “At its worst ... satire can degenerate into crude racism and sexism and amplify the biases of those who use it to mock others.” Her contribution, along with Rebecca Davis’ article, unearths some of satire’s internal power dynamics and hierarchies shaped by colonialism, racism and patriarchy. It is not only political rulers who control access to the public, and

censorship can work in subtle ways. Prior to the social media, many satirists worked at the whim of media editors, TV producers, and theatre managers. Since opportunities, provided or denied, can decide the fate of an artist, much remains to be discovered in the hidden histories of African satire.

**Jochen Luckscheiter**  
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# Decolonising Satire:

## The History and Future of Political Humour in South Africa

Sisonke Msimang

At its best, satire is a heady mix of comedy and tragedy. It is irreverent and silly and yet it can also offer powerful insights into the worst fears and most closely held taboos of a society. Good satire frees those who laugh along, and it makes fools of those it targets. Because it uses humour, satire can survive in plain view for a long time before those who hold power recognise it. In many closed societies, satire provides openings and bright spots. In open ones, it allows for deeper probing and for radical bursts of insight.

At its worst, however, satire can degenerate into crude racism and sexism and amplify the biases of those who use it to mock others. In societies that are already divided, satire can demonstrate the worst tendencies of those who already hold some form of cultural or economic power. In political contexts where artists and satirists have deeply-rooted social capital, where their power derives from racial and gender and heterosexist privilege, they can wield their power too heavily. In these scenarios, satirists may wound communities and people who are already marginalised in ways that fundamentally undermine their dignity, turning public sentiment against them and fostering further divisions.

In South Africa, satire has a strange and complicated history and so its place in this society is an uneasy one. South Africa is a classic liberal democracy in which individual rights, especially freedom of expression, takes pride of place. Without this right, there is a real danger that politicians and state actors would abuse their powers. Those who uphold the right to free speech often argue that this freedom is foundational to the building of a robust and fair society.

### Defining Satire

Any discussion of satire must begin by recognising that there is a long and rich history of African political humour and that, in South Africa in particular, virtually all political humour since the advent of colonialism has been created by and responsive to a range of factors that shaped Western democracies, including of course the profoundly racist ideologies that allowed for European expansion and dominance. Defined as a combination of “wit and burlesque to mount an attack on someone or something through laughter”<sup>1</sup>, satire is by no means a European invention. Across the continent, there are long traditions of satire, parable and allegory, often replete with symbolism, such as talking animals and powerful spirits, angry gods and mystical creatures, heroic men who take on forces larger than themselves. These devices are used to provide advice and guidance through the use of humour and metaphor.

In “Desperation”, for example, Nigerian poet Hope Eghagha writes, “Parliament is in their hands/ Legislators have eaten the pounding pestle”<sup>2</sup>. Anyone with an understanding of the importance of ground yam or maize or cassava to African diets understands that the pounding pestle is a crucial part of any community. Without it, a society cannot eat, and therefore cannot reproduce itself. Eghagha’s words provide a classic example of African satire: the absurdity of eating a pestle is at once funny and tragic, but it requires an understanding of metaphor and of the role and place of symbols in creating meaning.

In Africa, satire is about more than humour, tragedy and parable, however:



**Sisonke Msimang** is a South African writer who has been published in the *New York Times*, the *Huffington Post* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, and whose stories have been profiled on *The Moth* and TED.

it also gives voice to anger. Indeed, it was Joseph Hall, an early English satirist, who noted in *Virgidemiarum* that, “satire should be like the porcupine, that shoots sharp quills out in each angry line”<sup>3</sup>.

Anger is important to political and social satire because it inspires change. In Africa, as elsewhere, without anger, satire might be reduced to mere observation or parody. Anger focuses satire; it generates the impetus for change.

During colonisation, many African societies developed innovative ways of coping with racism and economic exploitation to reclaim their humanity. Since independence, some of Africa’s finest writers of fiction have used the core tenets of satire in their novels: irony, exaggeration, invective and abuse, and impersonation and mimicry. In a sense, they have invented a uniquely African form of satire. Examples include *Man of the People*, by Chinua Achebe and *Wizard of the Crow*, by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, as well as *Prisoners of Jebs*, Ken Saro Wiwa’s scathing book about the corruption of Nigeria under military rule. And of course one cannot talk about post colonial satire without mentioning *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s novel about excrement and filth in Ghana, and Wole Soyinka’s extensive body of work, most notably, in terms of satire, *The Interpreters*.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary African satire continues to employ these devices to good effect. Whether in the brilliant work of Anne Kansiime, the Ugandan entertainer who dispenses everyday wisdom and wry commentary and is especially expert at imitating politicians, NGO leaders and village moralists, or in Nollywood films that expand the Nigerian-as-scammer stereotype to laugh-

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It is important to note that, while satire in a liberal democracy critiques state actors, African satire has always criticised those who abuse power. For Africans, this includes the colonisers and those who continue to play a disproportionate economic role in the continent’s affairs.

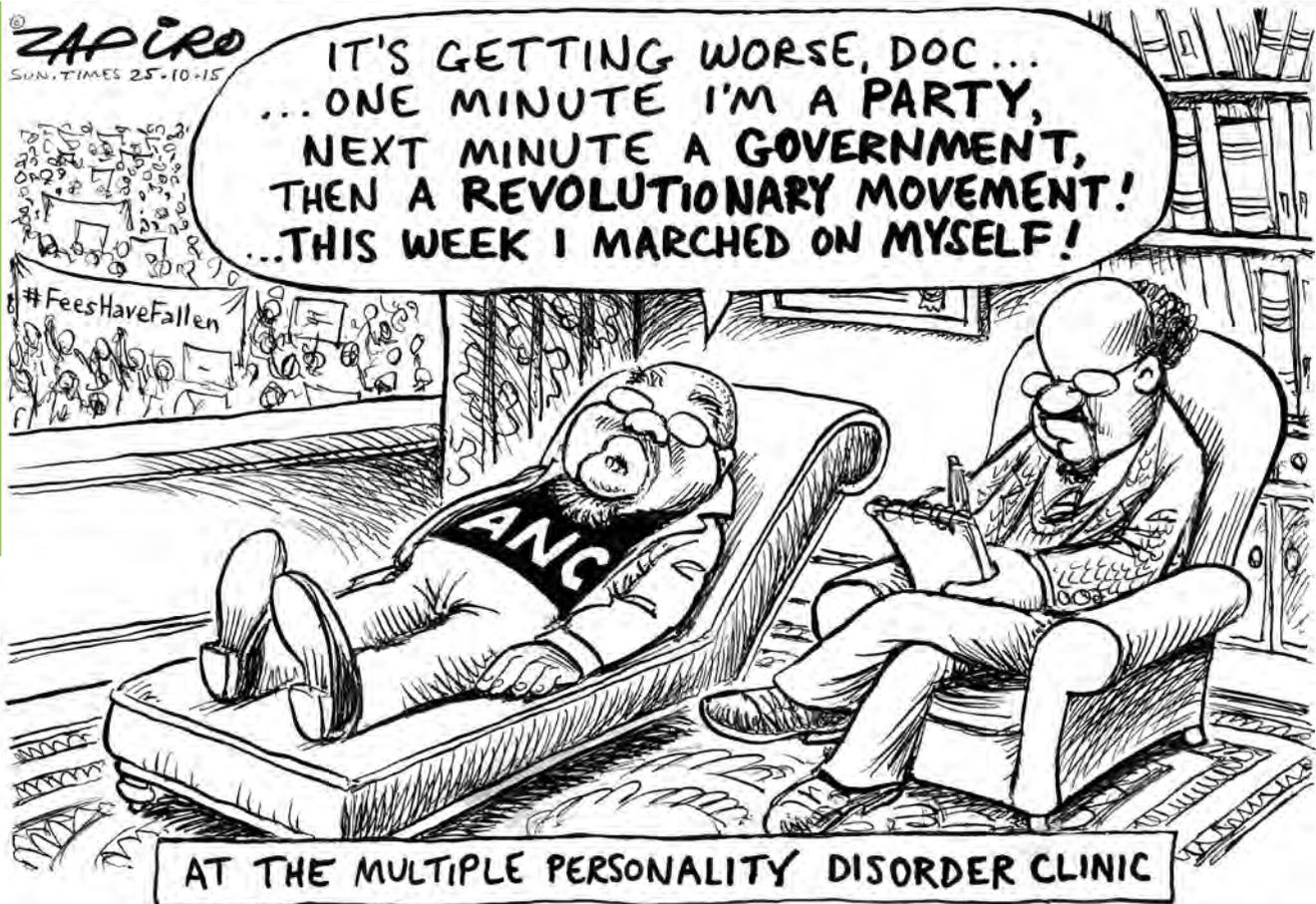
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bility through the exaggerations of satire.

It is important to note that, while satire in a liberal democracy critiques state actors, African satire has always criticised those who abuse power. For Africans, this includes the colonisers and those who continue to play a disproportionate economic role in the continent’s affairs. The very notion of cultural and racial superiority has always been a prime target for Africa’s satirists.

## A Racist History

It is noteworthy that satire became more popular at the same time as scientific racism was ascendant in Europe and America and the exhibition of humans became more widespread. Indeed, the very idea of the human zoo lent itself to satirical representation and many illustrations of the human “others” were produced to much laughter and merriment in these societies. Depictions of Africans found their way into the works of artists like Robert Cruikshank, whose illustration of *The Devil’s Ball* was an early and damaging caricature of Africans. The iconographic importance of these works cannot be overestimated. Indeed they found their way into 20th-century images, including Herge’s *The Adventures of Tintin*. These images and the accompanying texts



were used to disseminate ideas of European superiority, ostensibly through humour.

It is also no coincidence that the human zoos, circus acts and freak shows that became commonplace in the late-19th and early-20th centuries were often accompanied by “entertaining” narratives full of ribald jokes and exaggerated comedy that mocked the people who were on display.

In South Africa, the oldest example of written satire is William Sammons’ political magazine, Sam Sly’s African Journal.<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1843, the magazine sought to “replicate an impression of metropolitan whiteness”, to quote Holdridge. Its “satires that focused on race derided the Khoikhoi and Xhosa as incapable of achieving equality with whites, drawing on growing anti-humanitarian sentiment in the Cape”. Like most European satire at the time, it used aggressively racist stereotypes to develop and shore up the idea of what it meant to be European.

## Black Voices Silenced

Jumping ahead to 20th-century South Africa, a new form of satire emerged – most of it organised against apartheid. Perusing the

literature on South African anti-apartheid political satire, it is difficult to find analyses that do not foreground the contributions of white writers and artists. From Athol Fugard and Barney Simon to Peter-Dirk Uys (better known as Evita Bezuidenhout) and Stephen Francis (the American expatriate creator of the popular comic strip “Madam & Eve”), to visual artists such as Brett Murray, Anton Kannemeyer and Willem Boshoff, white males are over-represented in the satirical canon.

The truth is far more complex, of course. As far back as the 1930s, satire blossomed in the pages of African-language newspapers like *Ilanga lase Natal* and *Imvo Zabantsundu*. Writers like H.E. Dhlomo and Casey Motsisi became so popular that they were published in *Sjambok*, a liberal satirical political magazine with a multi-racial and deeply politicised audience. In the 1950s, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa and Lewis Nkosi pioneered an ironic way of writing that was steeped in the experiences of black township life.

By the 1970s, the list of black writers who used satire, impersonation, irony and exaggeration grew to include Sindiwe Magona, whose stories drew on the relation-

ships between white madams and domestic workers in a manner that was both humorous and political. Like other African writers, Magona's work poked fun at the ridiculousness of white society's skewed social and political mores.

Nowhere has the erasure of black voices been as chronic however, as in the field of political cartooning. The lionisation of Jonathan Shapiro – whose pen name is Zapiro – is worth examining in some detail because it serves as an excellent example of how often white voices are mythologised at the expense of black ones. There is no denying Shapiro's talent, but it is also clear that his path to success has been fairly straightforward compared to the trajectories of his less famous black counterparts.

Jonathan Shapiro was an active member of the United Democratic Front, which grew in strength in the 1980s. Like many white South Africans, Shapiro was forced to serve in the army. He served under duress and refused to bear arms. After his military service, he joined the End Conscription Campaign, and then applied for and was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study cartooning at the School for the Visual Arts in New York.

By contrast, Mogorosi Motshumi is an important cartoonist of a similar age to Shapiro, although few South Africans have ever heard of him. He was the first black cartoonist in the country to pen a regular black-and-white strip. It was called "Sloppy" and appeared in the monthly struggle publication, *Learn and Teach*. In 1980, Motshumi was detained and held in solitary for two weeks for being found with banned literature – cartoons. The time in jail had a profound effect on him. He moved around a bit and ended up in Johannesburg, spending the decade at *Learn and Teach*.

When *Learn and Teach* closed, Motshumi was jobless. Diagnosed with HIV, he has struggled financially but has continued to produce art. During a residency in 2014, he noted that he continues to draw and to produce comics because "government is chipping away at freedom, taking away a little bit at a time. If there is no resistance, they will take it away." He went on to say, "Cartoonists are like lepers, not very social."<sup>6</sup>

Motshumi's story demonstrates that the consequences of black resistance – even the simple act of drawing – were far more dire for black satirists living under apartheid than they were for those who had the protection of their class and racial privilege.

There were other black cartoonists, including Newell Goba, Nanda Soobben, Percy Sedumedi and George Msimang. But it is true that there weren't many. In part, Mason suggests that this is because they faced strong resistance from white editors in liberal papers who chose "to share the services of a few white cartoonists and to buy syndicated comic strips" from America, rather than to work with black talent.<sup>7</sup>

The amplification of certain voices and the erasure of others has profound effects. It means that, while it may be true that Shapiro is an equal-opportunity humourist who stood against apartheid and is equally vociferous in his critique of the new black leaders, to focus on him, Uys, Kannemeyer or Murray, without widening the scope of analysis to include the work of black satirists, creates the idea in the new South Africa that there were simply no black satirists. It feeds into a pernicious idea that whites created all biting political commentary, all the plays and novels that stood against the old regime, while black people – aside from a handful of leaders – put their bodies on the line. In other words, it reinforces the old racist idea that whites think and create intellectual material, while blacks "feel", rage or lash out.

There is no space within this constrained narrative to question the motives, advantages and privileges of white humourists and artists, nor is there room for meaningful discussions about the effects that apartheid had on the production of certain kinds of knowledge and the commissioning of certain kinds of art. White artists – advantaged by their skin colour in the "old" South Africa – are today assumed to have already proven themselves by being forthright and brave challengers of the apartheid order.

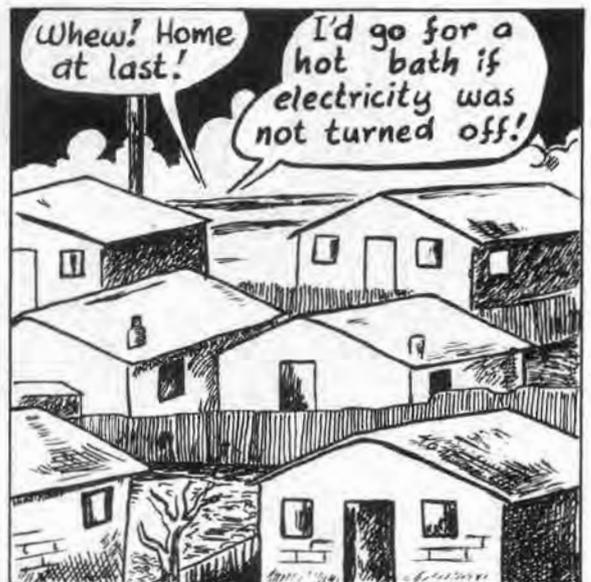
Interestingly, black leaders in the new dispensation get no such moral cover for their conduct. The role of black leaders in fighting apartheid does not exempt them from present-day critiques, nor should it. By the same token, however, the efforts of white artists who stood up to apartheid should not today exempt them from present-day charges of racism.

## The Rise of Black Twitter

What has changed – and undeniably so in the last few years – is the fact that the opinions of black South Africans have gained more cultural and political weight. Combined with technology that allows black

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF...

# SLOPPY

satire to be quickly and easily shared, this new influence offers exciting possibilities. While Twitter in general has opened up space for all South Africans with access to smartphones and electricity to participate in more inclusive debates, Black Twitter has emerged as a particularly important space.

Quoted in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Meredith Clarke defines Black Twitter as “a large network of black Twitter users and their loosely coordinated interactions, many of which accumulate into trending topics due to the network’s size, interconnectedness, and unique activity”. As she notes, “black” isn’t limited to U.S. blacks. In South Africa, Black Twitter refers to those who closely follow *national* culture and politics and who dip in and out of broader black Twitter debates.

Characterising Twitter with an explicitly raced analysis is important in South Africa. Like other spaces in which African satire is evident, Black Twitter seeks to critique all forms of oppressive power – not simply the power of state actors. In particular, Black Twitter is characterised by a deep commitment to exposing racism. It necessarily sets itself up in opposition to mainstream Twitter at critical moments – and mainstream Twitter in South Africa continues to be dominated by white voices and shaped by the institutional practices of racist entities.

An example of Black Twitter satire can be found in a meme that circulated in the aftermath of the Economic Freedom Front’s campaign to get President Zuma to #PayBackTheMoney he spent building a palatial home in Nkandla. The president is often lampooned by the media as being uneducated, rural and financially insolvent. And so, when a photo of him with the caption “I’m waiting for my debit orders to go through then I will pay the money at Shoprite and SMS the pin” was produced, it quickly went viral. The meme was devastatingly funny, channelling citizens’ anger at the extravagant use of taxpayer money while it also spoke to the tragedy of South Africa. The president appeared to be brought to his knees in the same way as the vast majority of black South Africans, those who remain poor, exploited and needing to make excuses to avoid paying their debts.

At the same time, many on Black Twitter note the double standard applied to black leaders in matters related to corruption. When the private sector is caught bribing or colluding or violating laws, media interest wanes quickly. The response to the collapse



At the same time, many on Black Twitter note the double standard applied to black leaders in matters related to corruption. When the private sector is caught bribing or colluding or violating laws, media interest wanes quickly.

of the Grayston pedestrian bridge in September 2015, which killed three people and injured many more, demonstrated Black Twitter’s ability to provide a race-based critique to social events. One tweet made the point with few words. A large black crowd holding knobkerries and traditional weapons is gathered on a bridge. The caption reads, “We just want to talk” and the hashtag is #BridgeCollapse. It plays on white fears of being “overrun” by blacks while turning the tables on a firm that has far more real power than a crowd of poor black people.

It is easy to be cynical about the limits of Twitter. Many people on social media are rightly criticised for being “clicktivists”: they can profess strong views on social matters without having to make any real commitment. It is easy to dismiss the abundance of photos of Beyoncé and the memes of Robert Mugabe falling down a set of steps as mere silliness. Yet Twitter’s satirical power resides precisely in its ability to meld popular culture and political critique.

Explosive social commentary is just as likely to issue from an account named “QueenOfSlay” or “SerenasBFF” as it is from that of an esteemed journalist. The names themselves affirm black life and thought as important and meaningful, and are a form of satire on their own. This creative approach to politics and social relations takes a default stance of constructive and rigorous critique against organised power of any kind. This is especially important at this moment in South Africa’s political history, as a generation that is far more critical

of the ruling party finds its voice and takes aim at a broad range of social actors.

Despite its limitations, Twitter constitutes a vibrant and influential space where the long history of black intellectual and satirical engagement is evident for all who wish to see it. In South Africa, satire has never been more rich or vocal. The social changes that are coming will most certainly benefit from the existence of a new space in which irreverence and political analysis are fundamentally intertwined. ■■■

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# Zambezi News: Brightening Up the Gloom of Zimbabwean Politics

## Interview

Zambezi News is a comedy series that has found audiences in Zimbabwe and abroad since its launch in late 2011. Created by Samm Farai Monro and Tongai Makawa and produced by Mutheu Maitha, Zambezi News hilariously deals with everything from race to culture to politics to sport. News presenters Mandape Mandape (Tongai Makawa), Jerome Weathers (Samm Farai Monro) and Kudzaishe Mushayahembe (Michael Kudakwashe) present live in studio as well as reports from the field, blinged-out music videos, cheeky adverts and more.

After their performance at Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF) in Berlin in September 2015, the three performers took some time out to speak about the place and purpose of satire in Zimbabwe today.

HBF: Zimbabwe's situation doesn't appear very laughable. Politics doesn't change, the economy is down, and people struggle to make ends meet. Why does Zimbabwe need satire?

**Tongai Makawa:** Looking at history, across the world there always has been political propaganda trying to make things look rosy and keep people quiet. This kind of stuff has also been shoved down the throats of Zimbabweans back home, so we found that there was a need for an alternative narrative. But it was important to find a form that engages people in a positive way, because you cannot have people live in a depressing reality and on top of it tell them how messed up their reality is.

HBF: What is it that you are hoping to achieve?

**Samm Farai Monro:** For us, satire is a way of reaching young Zimbabweans and trying to inspire them to actually believe that they can be part of the change needed in the country. It's another form of creative activism. With our organisation, Magamba Network, we also use other forms of creative activism such as spoken word, hip-hop, new media and festivals.

**Tongai Makawa:** Satire informs as much as it entertains. We felt that political satire is a great way to make people reflect about the situation in the country, to make them think about it, but in a light format. This way you can keep young people engaged and also make them think of possible solutions – something that may be harder to achieve when constantly giving out negative energies. So it's about looking for those touchy subjects and seeing how you can sugarcoat them so that the people can absorb them.



*Zambezi News presenters Manda-pe Mandape (Tongai Makawa), Jerome Weathers (Samm Farai Monro) and Kudzaishe Mushayembe (Michael Kudakwashe).*  
© Pro Co/Quicksilver

**Michael Kudakwashe:** It's also about teaching young people that you're allowed to think for yourself. Don't just be an android. Don't be a robot. In Zimbabwe everyone is programmed: government is not teaching the children to think, they're teaching them to obey. And we hope that using satire can help change that.

HBF: Where do you get your inspiration?

**Samm Farai Monro:** The biggest inspiration behind Zambezi News is the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation. They are the state's propaganda mouthpiece and literally write 50 percent of our material. Their incompetence and their bungling are so epic that it's artistic in a way. They suddenly just cut to a blank screen, or the presenter says, "We now go to our next report" and the camera stays fixed on him for five minutes. Classic stuff! You couldn't make it up!

HBF: Are you sometimes afraid of risking too much, given Zimbabwe's repressive political situation? How much freedom of expression do you enjoy, and where are the limits?

**Tongai Makawa:** We have 100 percent freedom of expression. Freedom *after* expression, that's where the problems come in. And yes, we do fear, but look, somebody has to do it. We can't all live in fear. So what we do with our satire is to make people laugh at their situations, and if you can laugh at your situation, you look at it differently. It's not as hard as you might think it is: you always see a way out of it or a way to deal with it. So that's what we provide for our people – hopefully. Yes, we are afraid. Yes, we've been threatened. It happens quite often. But we are still here.

HBF: Is there anything you don't joke about?

**Samm Farai Monro:** Angela Merkel. [laughs]

**Michael Kudakwashe:** The president. Don't joke about him. Don't mention anyone by name. There are certain things we don't do because that is just asking to die. We just imply. Everybody will know what we are talking about, but you can't really get us. "You said this!" "No, we did not. We didn't talk about anybody. You thought of that." That kind of thing.

**Tongai Makawa:** You just said the President now, so...

**Michael Kudakwashe:** No, the question was what we don't do and I said "the president". I didn't name him! I didn't name him! [laughs]

HBF: You have become quite successful internationally. Does this create problems for you at home?

**Samm Farai Monro:** They don't mind us taking Zambezi News to Europe. Although it's raising awareness about the situation back home, they will be like: "It's fine – let them go with Zambezi News to Europe. We don't let Zimbabweans in the diaspora vote, so go preach to them as much as you like."

We get much more heat when we're doing stuff back home. It is the rural areas of Zimbabwe where they worry about us taking it. So we have our DVDs confiscated and raided from different community radio stations that we work with. After we launched Season 3, the police were on the phone with us, the Central Intelligence Organisation, the censorship board, you name it. Michael was threatened recently by suspected state security agents. So the threats are real, especially when you're doing the outreach within Zimbabwe.

HBF: Do you see African satire on the rise generally?

**Samm Farai Monro:** Yes, definitely. It's a great moment for African satire and comedy. I think it's a very important moment because you've got someone like South African comedian Trevor Noah who has taken over the Daily Show and that's going to put African comedy and satire at the forefront of people's minds. And then also you have this blossoming of satire across the continent from South Africa to Kenya, from Senegal to Egypt to Zimbabwe. It's a growing movement that I think is becoming more and more popular as we can share stuff online. So I think it's a really great organic phenomenon that young Africans are using to deal with their social and political situations and to express themselves and access information in an alternative way.

HBF: What would be the end for satire in Zimbabwe?

**Samm Farai Monro:** The death of a comedian would be the death of satire. Although the laughs of the audience would echo on.

**Michael Kudakwashe:** We are immortal [laughs]. We will be martyrs!

**Samm Farai Monro:** And other comedians will rise where that comedian has stood before he was killed!

But seriously, you can't kill satire because you can't kill peoples' sense of humour and their sense of justice. And I think those two things are very much tied into what satire is about. ■■■

# A Man's World?

## Women in South African Comedy

Rebecca Davis

The first time someone referred to me as “one of the funniest women writers in South Africa”, I was flattered as all hell. But as time went on, and people kept introducing me with that description, its appeal began to wane.

Wasn't there something weird about the fact that it stressed I was one of the funniest *women* writers? Did that mean that I was funny, *for a woman*, considering that women aren't very funny? Did it mean that if I were to be compared with funny *male* writers, I wouldn't stand up very well? Why was it necessary to emphasise that I was female at all?

Welcome to the overthinking world of self-doubt that is often the lot of women trying to play in a “funny” space. It's a terrain that has been dominated by men for centuries. Sure, Shakespeare wrote some comic female characters – if you're part of the school of thought that thinks Shakespeare's comedies are actually funny, which I am not – but then again, he knew all the parts would be played by male actors. Still in the 17th century, playwright William Congreve thoughtfully opined: “I must confess I have never made an Observation of what I Apprehend to be true Humour in Women.”

Fast-forward 320 years, and there's still something about letting women be funny which seems threatening and transgressive to many. If there are jokes to be made, the men have that handled. A woman's role is to laugh and clap in response – even if she is the target of the joke.

The poster-boy for the modern women-shouldn't-try-be-funny brigade was, of

course, the late author and contrarian Christopher Hitchens. In a now infamous 2007 article for *Vanity Fair* titled “Why women just aren't funny”, Hitchens drew on dodgy evolutionary biology to advance the headache-inducing theory that women aren't funny because they've never needed to be. They haven't ever been forced to use humour to gain an advantage over rival females when seeking a mate, and as a result never developed the funny bone that is a staple of male evolutionary makeup.

Hitchens was, if you'll pardon my French, a bit of an asshole. He was right about some stuff, but dead wrong on other topics – and this was one of them. Most infuriatingly, the dude seemingly could not stop flogging this horse. Even after having been categorically taken down in his views by countless hilarious women, Hitchens was still out there in 2011, prattling away about how females can't deliver a punchline to save their lives. RIP, Hitch, but we won't miss your views on this subject.

Hitchens certainly isn't alone. As recently as July 2015, former Disney CEO Michael Eisner was quoted as saying that a woman who is both beautiful and funny “is impossible to find”. Even more ludicrously, he was in a public conversation with actress Goldie Hawn when he made these remarks. *Goldie Hawn*: a woman who is self-evidently both beautiful and funny. How she managed to stop herself from punching him on the nose, I'll never know.

The cases I'm offering you are from America, it must be said. Land of the free, home of late-night TV talkshow hosts who are *all men*. When South African comedian Trevor Noah ascended to the Daily Show throne, many hailed it as a long overdue vic-



**Rebecca Davis** is a journalist who lives in Cape Town. She studied at Rhodes University and Oxford before working in lexicography at the Oxford English Dictionary. In 2011, she returned to South Africa and is currently a staff writer for the *Daily Maverick* and a frequent contributor to other South African publications. Earlier this year she published her debut book, a collection of humorous essays titled *Best White and Other Anxious Delusions*.

tory for transformation in US comedy. Then *Vanity Fair* ran a piece on this new golden age for TV. It was accompanied by a picture which made the point far more forcefully than 1000 words: 10 men in suits, quaffing single-malt. If that's what transformation looks like, colour me unimpressed.

But as I say, that's America for you. What about down south, here in the developing world? With our keenly honed political consciousness about racial and gender equality, is it too much to hope that things might look different in South Africa's comedy scene?

As I was considering this question, I came across an advertisement for a show starring "South Africa's top comedians". *Mass Hysteria: The Long Bunfight to Freedom* has been touring the country to sold-out houses. It features five male comedians – and one female. I'm no mathematician,

but when women make up more than half South Africa's population, that ratio seems a little out.

In the interests of fairness, I should stress that this situation isn't always typical. I was recently asked to be a guest on a South African comedy panel show that featured a female host and a female writer. There were two of us female guests, as compared to four men – but still, that's looking healthier.

I'm not out there on the coalface of comedy, though, so I turned for help to two very funny friends who certainly are. Sibongile "Sbosh" Mafu is one of the most in-demand young faces around, having built up a prodigious Twitter following by virtue of her razor-sharp insights into South African society.

Then there's Anne Hirsch, who became a cult figure in South Africa through her



*Anne Hirsch hosts Western Cape Premier Helen Zille.*



*Tumi Morake during the 2015 Mass Hysteria comedy show in Johannesburg, South Africa. © Gallo Images / Gabriele Mezzatestar*

online talkshow *The Anne Hirsch Show*, and is currently hosting TV's *The Great South African Bake-Off*. Hirsch also has first-hand experience of life as a woman in stand-up comedy, having won the second season of the state broadcaster's *So You Think You're Funny* contest for emerging comics.

If anyone would know whether life's getting better or worse for South Africa's funny

shows how bad it still is in terms of visibility."

Tumi Morake – the one woman who appears in *Mass Hysteria* – is certainly the most powerful female figure in South African comedy at the moment, in constant demand on both television and the stand-up circuit. Her success is well earned. I defy anyone to claim that Morake cannot confidently hold her own amidst male comedians. Her routines elicit belly laughs. In fact, Morake is much funnier than the vast majority of South Africa's male comedians – a point that Mafu makes too.

"Female comedians have to be extra special," she says. "You're treated like you have to do a bit more than your male counterparts. Comedy is hard graft, whether you're male or female, but women still have to deal with the sense of surprise people have when a woman tells a joke."

Hirsch agrees. "When it comes to female comedians, people still have this thing of: 'Oh, she's just going to talk about her period.' And why shouldn't she? That's her experience!"

The idea that comedy has been dominated internationally by male experience is impossible to refute. In South Africa, where

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*You're treated like you have to do a bit more than your male counterparts. Comedy is hard graft, whether you're male or female, but women still have to deal with the sense of surprise people have when a woman tells a joke.*

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women, I reasoned, these gals were it. So I put it to them: is it still more difficult to be a female comedian?

"I think it is," responds Mafu immediately. "It's nice to see women in comedy who you can name, which is quite important: Tumi Morake, Celeste Ntuli, Angel Campey... But the mere fact that I can only think of three off the top of my head just

pop culture tends to lag behind the rest of the world, the content of male-originated comedy is often still dominated by sexist jokes. It came as little surprise when eagle-eyed American journalists spotted that Trevor Noah's Twitter feed featured numerous digs at women and their appearance. This is standard fodder for South Africa's male comics – so much so that it barely raises an eyebrow.

There is pressure, says Hirsch, for female comics to just “mix in” with this type of humour, particularly when they're starting out. “There's this thing where you don't want to be too different at the beginning, because at the end of the show you're going to have to go backstage and have beers with the boys,” she says.

But Mafu is quick to state that, although South African comedy can seem like a “bro-club” from the outside, individual male comedians are generally friendly and welcoming to women. “More than a lot of other entertainment industries, it's inclusive in that regard,” she says. “Women in comedy are still having fun.”

There's an important point to be made here, too. While the relative scarcity of women in South African comedy can make entry a daunting prospect, it also offers a lot of potential for those women who are brave enough to give it a shot. Precisely because comedy has been male-dominated for so long, women talking about their own experiences can often be seen as fresh and exciting. It's something we're certainly witnessing in the States at the moment, as evidenced by the rise of a figure like Amy Schumer and her “bad girl” comedy. Mafu and Hirsch say it's true for South Africa too.

Mafu says that, while men still have greater license to make certain types of jokes – about sex, for instance – that doesn't mean there's not space for women to inhabit. “Women still have uncharted territory,” she says. “Men have told the same stories for so many years. Now you get women talking about experiences we haven't heard on a stage, not just playing second fiddle to men. We still have all that open space – potential to do some really cool shit.” Adopting a tone of mock gravitas, Mafu declaims: “Through our oppression, we shall find our funny!”

But speaking of oppression: let's talk about race for a second. “It's easier to be a white woman in comedy,” Mafu believes. “Look at Hollywood at the moment: Tina

Fey, Amy Schumer, Ellen, Sarah Silverman... If you had to name the top 20 female comedians, there might not be a black woman who would even feature.”

Does this hold true for South Africa, though? Tumi Morake, the most successful woman on the country's comedy scene, is black. Celeste Ntuli, arguably her second-in-command, is black, too. We obviously shouldn't understate the significance of the structural barriers that might prevent black women from contemplating a career in comedy in the first place – but once they're on the scene, are they less likely than their white counterparts to be well received?

“You don't see a lot of them, but the ones we do see are the most successful,” Mafu acknowledges.

Just because a few women have made it to the top, though, doesn't mean that the battle is won. There are clearly still far too few South African women in the space, and the question we're left with is: What can be done about it? Is it time to consider some form of positive discrimination, mandating a minimum number of women on stage during comedy shows?

“I think that's unfortunately already happening,” says Hirsch. “There are so few women in comedy that if you've even done a couple of weeks of stand-up, and have maybe three minutes of decent material, comedy producers kind of force you on to huge lineups, a giant stage with 5 000 people watching. You think: ‘Wow, I must be amazing!’ And then, of course, you fail miserably.”

In Hirsch's view, this kind of approach “really doesn't help anyone”. She says the audiences are not to blame. “You can actually feel it when you go on: they *want* to laugh.” But bombing on this scale, when your material isn't up to scratch, can be sufficiently traumatic to put you off the scene for life.

“I see a lot of women starting out and they disappear very quickly,” Hirsch says. “Like any job, it is difficult because there are more men, they are more experienced, and they are helping each other out. Which is fine, because they obviously relate to each other. But it does mean there is a lot of pressure.”

More of a culture of female mentoring would go a long way towards helping the situation, she suggests. And otherwise? “You've just got to keep at it and pay your dues,” Hirsch says. ■■■

# How to Write about Africa

Binyavanga Wainaina

Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari' in your title. Subtitles may include the words 'Zanzibar', 'Masai', 'Zulu', 'Zambezi', 'Congo', 'Nile', 'Big', 'Sky', 'Shadow', 'Drum', 'Sun' or 'Bygone'. Also useful are words such as 'Guerrillas', 'Timeless', 'Primordial' and 'Tribal'. Note that 'People' means Africans who are not black, while 'The People' means black Africans.

Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. If you must include an African, make sure you get one in Masai or Zulu or Dogon dress.

In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular.

Make sure you show how Africans have music and rhythm deep in their souls, and eat things no other humans eat. Do not mention rice and beef and wheat; monkey-brain is an African's cuisine of choice, along with goat, snake, worms and grubs and all manner of game meat. Make sure you show that you are able to eat such food without

flinching, and describe how you learn to enjoy it – because you care.

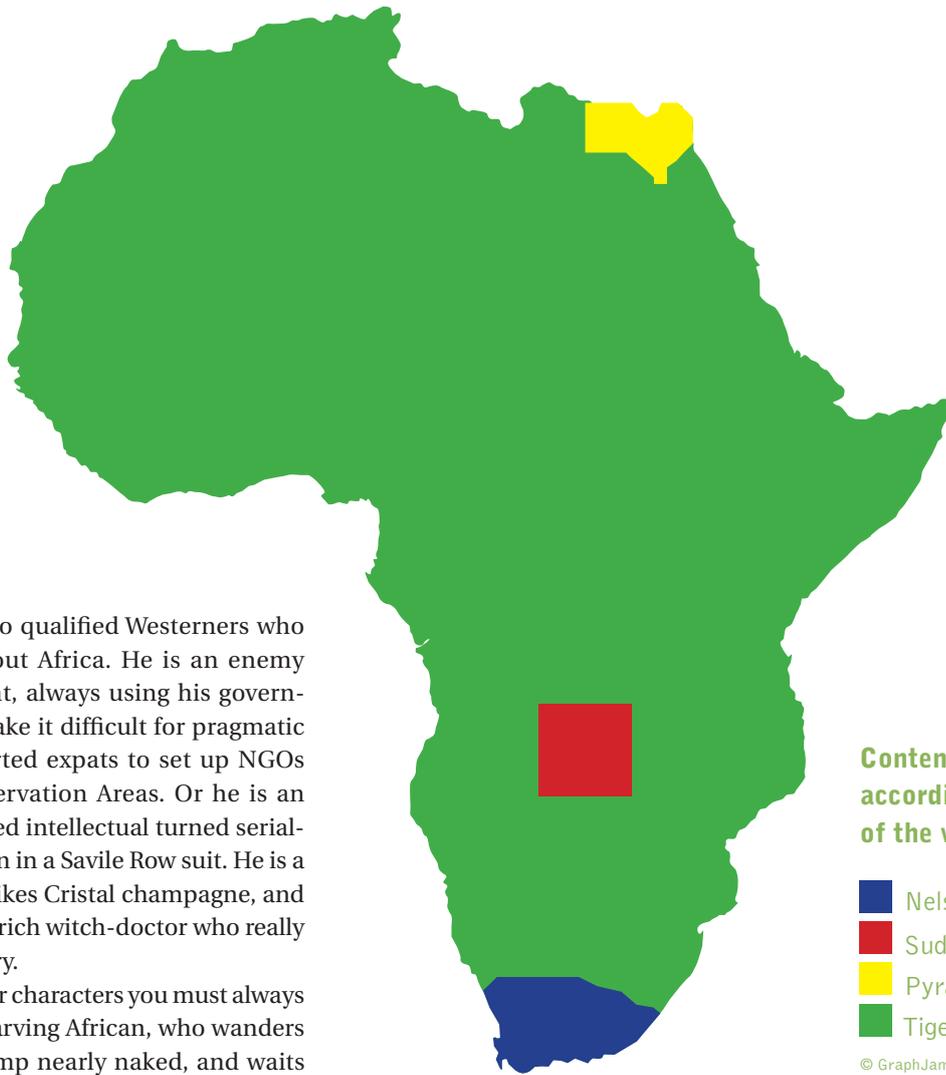
Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation.

Throughout the book, adopt a sotto voice, in conspiracy with the reader, and a sad I-expected-so-much tone. Establish early on that your liberalism is impeccable, and mention near the beginning how much you love Africa, how you fell in love with the place and can't live without her. Africa is the only continent you can love – take advantage of this. If you are a man, thrust yourself into her warm virgin forests. If you are a woman, treat Africa as a man who wears a bush jacket and disappears off into the sunset. Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.

Your African characters may include naked warriors, loyal servants, diviners and seers, ancient wise men living in hermitic splendour. Or corrupt politicians, inept polygamous travel-guides, and prostitutes you have slept with. The Loyal Servant always behaves like a seven-year-old and needs a firm hand; he is scared of snakes, good with children, and always involving you in his complex domestic dramas. The Ancient Wise Man always comes from a noble tribe (not the money-grubbing tribes like the Gikuyu, the Igbo or the Shona). He has rheumy eyes and is close to the Earth. The Modern African is a fat man who steals and works in the visa office, refusing to give



**Binyavanga Wainaina** is a Kenyan author, publisher and cultural worker. He is the founding editor of one of Africa's leading literary institutions, Kwani?. His "How to write about Africa" attracted wide attention globally. In 2007, he was nominated by the World Economic Forum as a Young Global Leader. He declined the award. Until 2012 he was the Director of the Chinua Achebe Center for African Writers and Artists at Bard College.



work permits to qualified Westerners who really care about Africa. He is an enemy of development, always using his government job to make it difficult for pragmatic and good-hearted expats to set up NGOs or Legal Conservation Areas. Or he is an Oxford-educated intellectual turned serial-killing politician in a Savile Row suit. He is a cannibal who likes Cristal champagne, and his mother is a rich witch-doctor who really runs the country.

Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless. She can have no past, no history; such diversions ruin the dramatic moment. Moans are good. She must never say anything about herself in the dialogue except to speak of her (unspeakable) suffering. Also be sure to include a warm and motherly woman who has a rolling laugh and who is concerned for your well-being. Just call her Mama. Her children are all delinquent. These characters should buzz around your main hero, making him look good. Your hero can teach them, bathe them, feed them; he carries lots of babies and has seen Death. Your hero is you (if reportage), or a beautiful, tragic international celebrity/aristocrat who now cares for animals (if fiction).

Bad Western characters may include children of Tory cabinet ministers, Afrikaners, employees of the World Bank. When talking about exploitation by foreigners mention the Chinese and Indian traders. Blame the West for Africa's situation. But do not be too specific.

Broad brushstrokes throughout are good. Avoid having the African characters laugh, or struggle to educate their kids, or just make do in mundane circumstances. Have them illuminate something about Europe or America in Africa. African characters should be colourful, exotic, larger than life – but empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolutions in their stories, no depth or quirks to confuse the cause.

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**Broad brushstrokes throughout are good. Avoid having the African characters laugh, or struggle to educate their kids, or just make do in mundane circumstances.**

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Describe, in detail, naked breasts (young, old, conservative, recently raped, big, small) or mutilated genitals, or enhanced genitals. Or any kind of genitals. And dead bodies. Or, better, naked dead bodies. And especially rotting naked dead

bodies. Remember, any work you submit in which people look filthy and miserable will be referred to as the 'real Africa', and you want that on your dust jacket. Do not feel queasy about this: you are trying to help them to get aid from the West. The biggest taboo in writing about Africa is to describe or show dead or suffering white people.

Animals, on the other hand, must be treated as well rounded, complex characters. They speak (or grunt while tossing their manes proudly) and have names, ambitions and desires. They also have family values: see how lions teach their children? Elephants are caring, and are good feminists or dignified patriarchs. So are gorillas. Never, ever say anything negative about an elephant or a gorilla. Elephants may attack people's property, destroy their crops, and even kill them. Always take the side of the elephant. Big cats have public-school accents. Hyenas are fair game and have vaguely Middle Eastern accents. Any short Africans who live in the jungle or desert may be portrayed with good humour (unless they are in conflict with an elephant or chimpanzee or gorilla, in which case they are pure evil).

After celebrity activists and aid workers, conservationists are Africa's most important people. Do not offend them. You need them to invite you to their 30,000-acre game ranch or 'conservation area', and this is the only way you will get to interview the celebrity

activist. Often a book cover with a heroic-looking conservationist on it works magic for sales. Anybody white, tanned and wearing khaki who once had a pet antelope or a farm is a conservationist, one who is preserving Africa's rich heritage. When interviewing him or her, do not ask how much funding they have; do not ask how much money they make off their game. Never ask how much they pay their employees.

Readers will be put off if you don't mention the light in Africa. And sunsets, the African sunset is a must. It is always big and red. There is always a big sky. Wide empty spaces and game are critical – Africa is the Land of Wide Empty Spaces. When writing about the plight of flora and fauna, make sure you mention that Africa is overpopulated. When your main character is in a desert or jungle living with indigenous peoples (anybody short) it is okay to mention that Africa has been severely depopulated by Aids and War (use caps).

You'll also need a nightclub called Tropicana, where mercenaries, evil nouveau riche Africans and prostitutes and guerrillas and expats hang out.

Always end your book with Nelson Mandela saying something about rainbows or renaissances. Because you care. ■■■

*This article was first published in Granta – The Magazine of New Writing. Copyright 2011, Binyavanga Wainaina.*

# Struggling for Liberty through Tiny Insidious Strokes

## Interview

Damien Glez

One year after a popular uprising brought an end to the 27-year rule of Blaise Compaoré, Burkina Faso still finds itself in politically turbulent times. Tensions once again broke into the open on 16 September 2015 when the much-feared Regiment of Presidential Security – a military unit formed under Compaoré – stormed into a cabinet meeting to arrest Burkina Faso’s interim President Michael Kafando and Prime Minister Yacouba Isaac Zida. However, less than a week later, Kafando was peacefully returned to power after emergency talks with the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas), led by Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari. The much-awaited presidential and legislative elections that were supposed to take place on 11 October were postponed to 29 November 2015.

Although media outlets are generally able to cover the actions of the military and the transitional government, the press has not had an easy existence in the country. It was, for example, only in November 2014 that Zida announced his intention to reopen a probe into the 1998 murder of journalist Norbert Zongo, who was killed while investigating the death of an employee of Compaoré’s brother. A few months earlier, the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights had ruled that the failure of Compaoré’s government to seek accountability in Zongo’s death had harmed media freedom. In the case of Lohé Issa Konaté, the editor of the private weekly *L’Ouragan* who was sentenced to 12 months in prison in 2012 over articles alleging corruption in the state prosecutor’s office, the African Court found that imprisonment on charges of defamation violated the right to freedom of expression, and that the enforcement of criminal defamation laws should be limited.

It is against this backdrop that French-Burkinabe Damien Glez uses satire to expose issues such as corruption and tyranny that are otherwise often overlooked in a society that only recently re-opened the possibility of democratic rule. Glez is the managing editor of *Journal du Jeudi*, a weekly satirical journal, and perhaps the most influential political cartoonist in Burkina Faso. TIA’s (thisisafrica.me) Nancy Onyango caught up with the award-winning cartoonist to chat about his craft and the impact of satire on society.

Onyango: What motivated you to become a political cartoonist?

**Glez:** My solitary and taciturn temperament led me to experiment with drawing from a very young age. Later in my teenage years, my awareness of political debates made me integrate caricature and current events.



**Damien Glez** began his career as a cartoonist for the satirical weekly *Le Journal du Jeudi* in 1991. In 2001, in association with other cartoonists, he created the monthly pan-African satirical *Le Marabout*. Cartoonist-columnist, writer and lecturer at the University of Ouagadougou, he is also the author of the comic strip *Divine Comedy*. Damien Glez is a member of the Cartooning for Peace Foundation.

Do you see yourself as an artist, activist, journalist, or something else?

A cartoonist is a hybrid being, midway between a journalist, artist and humourist. This bestows upon him a unique place in the press. I don't see my role as that of an activist per se – even if some my caricatures are used by activists during demonstrations. As managing editor at Journal du Jeudi, my quotidian life is that of a journalist.

What do you think makes cartoons such a powerful medium to work with?

Cartoons, compared to editorial writing, have the advantage of functioning at several semantic levels, laden with meaning and containing graphic depictions of irrefutable truths which can't be easily put into words. It is for this reason that it is at times easier to draw things rather than to write them down. A cartoon does not just serve to illustrate an article; it has a language of its own. In politically turbulent situations such as Burkina Faso, cartoonists, because of their status as entertainers, also can express things that a normal journalist may not be able to.

Has the climate for journalism and freedom of the press improved in Burkina Faso since the popular uprising in 2014?

Much hasn't changed since then. I have to say that it wasn't impossible to work under Blaise Compaoré, even if at times there were summons and lawsuits. During the recent rampage caused by an attempted coup on 16 September 2015, local radio stations were damaged. Our newspaper, however, was able to publish and our cartoons were available on the internet. In a country where democracy is still so young, the political environment is at times unpredictable, but this is an inherent part of the job – and an interesting period to witness as a cartoonist. It is not in Ouagadougou that Charlie Hebdo cartoonists were assassinated.

What effects do you think your cartoons in Journal du Jeudi have on Burkina Faso?

Editorial cartoons do not change a society overnight, but they contribute to its evolution by reminding leaders that they are not monarchs. They also can help to defuse situations, notably ethnic or religious tensions, by putting into perspective the possible consequences. In a country like Burkina Faso where a great number of the population is uneducated and illiterate, cartoons are an important medium to work with.

But overall I believe the work of a cartoonist is a modest job. A recent documentary screened at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival presents us as “foot soldiers of democracy”, struggling for liberty through tiny insidious strokes. ■■■



**Nancy Onyango** is the operations director at This is Africa (TIA), an online pan-African forum set to reclaim Africa's identity and heritage in a globalised world. Before TIA, she was the communications manager at Arterial Network, a pan-African network of stakeholders engaged in the African creative sector. Nancy has a keen interest in the creative economy, freedom of expression and governance.



The president of the constitutional court is tasked with winnowing the candidates for the next elections, but the conditions set by the transition authorities risk making all the candidates unfit. © Damien Glez

# From Whispers to Screams:

## Satire as a Barometer of Kenya's Changing Political Landscape

Morris Kiruga

Every time I drive past State House in Nairobi, I remember a line from Whispers, Wahome Mutahi's famous satirical column in the Sunday Nation. In Mutahi's world, "the man who lives in the house on the hill" – referring to former President Daniel Arap Moi, who ruled the country from 1978 to 2002 – was the man "who appoints and disappoints". It was a potent jab at the president's dictatorial powers and whimsical way of making or rescinding appointments: "disappointing" to those summarily fired, but also to us, as an audience and a citizenry.

Whispers also referred to Kenya's second president as "the man from Sacho" (the president's birthplace), "Baba Gidi" (Gideon's father), and "Headmaster of Headmasters" because of his unusual leadership style. The column lasted from 1992 to 2003 and is still considered one of Kenya's most successful works of satire. It was not the first of its kind, but it remains significant even today because it thrived during Kenya's most repressive years. By the time its writer died in 2003, and the column with him, it was a full-page spread. In our house, where the Sunday paper was a family affair, most Whispers columns ended up glued to my scrapbook once the man of the house had read and re-read it. Wahome created a semi-fictional universe with its own rules, its own characters, and its own inside jokes. It was a place of dissent that tested the political environment.

As readers, we knew the actual story was not about Appep (his mother), Thatcher (his wife), Junior (his son), Investment (his first daughter) or Pajero (his last born daughter). Through these characters, he wove stories of rampant corruption, nepotism, police

harassment, ridiculous electioneering and political culture.

### The Satirist as the Standard-Bearer

Like Wahome, Kenyan political satirists have been stronger standard-bearers for political resistance than the vanguard activism of revolutionary movements. Since satire uses humour for a mask, it can dodge censors more easily than blatant calls for revolution. It takes a different form of bravery to laugh at the emperor's nakedness, let alone to tell him that he is naked in the first place.

Satirists like Wahome found on-the-streets political activism too confrontational, but their work was still dangerous. In 1986, Wahome himself was arrested and detained for more than year. That experience shook him and informed his later semi-fictional style, which allowed him to say the same things that got him arrested.

Non-satirical writers and artists didn't enjoy the extraordinary cloak that humour sometimes provides. During Kenya's most repressive years, they had to censor themselves to avoid jail time, loss of employment and everyday harassment. Under Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, pictures and articles died at the editor-in-chief's imperial desk. Since only a small population of the country was learned or experienced enough to serve in such high positions, censorship took a rather interesting and disturbing route. George Githii, who served as editor-in-chief at Kenya's biggest daily newspaper, the Daily Nation, from 1965 to 1982, had previously worked as President Kenyatta's press secretary. Despite his occa-



**Morris Kiruga** is a Kenyan writer, researcher, and blogger. His work has appeared in the *Daily Nation*, *the Star*, *Mail and Guardian*, *Mail and Guardian Africa*, *Destination Magazine*, and *BrainstormKE*. He has also been involved in projects such as Project Courage, the Storymoja Festival, #147NotJustANumber and Capture Kenya. Through his online work under the pseudonym Owaahh, he explores critical issues through a historical, research-based lens for a modern, cosmopolitan audience.

sionally scathing editorials, he frequently met with his former boss, and at least once deliberately published what he knew to be a blatant lie.<sup>1</sup> It was an uncomfortably cozy relationship as two levels of society worked together to sustain the political system.

That dalliance ended in August 1978 when Kenyatta died. The new man at the top had a known disdain for the press. Censorship took a different form, one tempered with open threats of revocation of license and other forms of punishment.

Many publications were shut down in the 1980s and the 1990s. One media house fired two of its reporters for writing a story that criticised government policy in 1994, two weeks after receiving open threats from the president and his minister of information. In the 1980s, media and artists were regularly muffled by a defunct old English law of "sedition", which saw the monarch as divine and provided such ambiguous grounds that it could be applied as determined by those making the arrest. In 1991, one clergyman



was arrested, charged and jailed for sedition because of a single paragraph in his desk diary. However, the repressive environment also inspired new forms of defiance and the satirist became a social experimenter and the political barometer of the times.

### An Artist's Artist

Before the hugely successful *Whispers*, Wahome Mutahi had another column in the *Daily Nation*, called *The Way I See It*. It was published right below Paul "Maddo" Kelemba's editorial cartoon, allowing the cartoonist and the writer to synchronise their messages. The cartoonist used Wahome's text as a springboard, and vice versa. Even in the repressive Moi days, they managed to sneak in satirical depictions of Kenya's political landscape. For instance, they featured a black cat with random thoughts in different scenarios, a direct allusion to the "fat cats" who roamed Kenya's politics at the time. It

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The fact that the show survived and no one was jailed signalled the shifting borders of Kenya's democratic space.

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was a clever circumvention of the official censors, even within the media house, but one that may have been lost to the majority of the audience. Sometimes, only the subjects of satire understand its true meaning, and in shaming or mocking them publicly, the satirist hopes to force them to react and change.

Political humour seems to have been

mistaken for comedy by a system that opened war fronts against emerging media. This was fortunate because it allowed satirical columns and productions to survive. Maddo, who worked as an editorial cartoonist on both of Kenya's most prominent newspapers, only survived the purges of the 1980s because the establishment did not consider cartoonists as "much of a threat". Wahome was never arrested again after switching to his semi-fictional style, despite escalating his attacks. Gado, the Tanzanian cartoonist who succeeded Maddo at the *Daily Nation*, survived too with little censorship in those early years. It seems that those in power saw something of the comedy but forgot that they were, in fact, the joke.

After the end of the state media's monopoly on television in the early 1990s, satire found a new home in a political environment bubbling with activity. As a social and political barometer, the extent to which satirists are willing to go, and censors are willing to let them, is telling of the state of freedoms in a country where repression is rife. Yet it also seems that satire fizzles out when repression fades.

A great example is the TV comedy show *Redykyulass*, which used the standard of early satirists to make new content for a young, exposed cosmopolitan audience. *Redykyulass* pushed the boundaries and then redefined them. It mocked the president's men and women, including a funny portrayal of the sycophants cultivated and rewarded by the man at the top. The fact that the show survived and no one was jailed signalled the shifting borders of Kenya's democratic space. It also inspired music and artwork of all kinds, further driving the



message that the country was not what it once was. One could speak up now without fear of arrest or harassment.

In one of the show's most popular skits, Walter Mong'are plays President Moi arriving at a function on his aides' shoulders. The cheering crowd welcomes the man from Sacho with jubilation, as was expected in real life. He gets off his ride and launches into a dance routine, joined by his aide-de-camp.<sup>2</sup> It is surprisingly entertaining.

The trick was that they knew President Moi was an avid fan of live performances. They integrated those into their format and eventually got invitations to perform at public events. Their satirical depictions cracked up audiences, including the main act himself. His minions followed suit, even when they were clearly being ridiculed on stage. It was a golden time for political satire, but it was only because a repressive regime was on its way out.

## The Mark of the Underdog

For the first two years after the pro-democracy National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) unseated the Moi regime in the 2002 elections, political satire retreated from the progress it had made in the previous decade. The underdog had won, or so it seemed then, as it had in 1963 when the country gained independence. The political activists of the 1980s and 1990s were now in power,

and the new man at the top cared little for the media and for media attention. Shows like *Redykyulass* died a quiet but noticeable death, and their successors did not pack a similar punch.

As the political situation deteriorated after 2005, political satire quickly found its way back, this time buoyed by new political and social spaces. Godfrey "Gado"

*Still from Redykyulass comedy show.*  
© KTN

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*As the political situation deteriorated after 2005, political satire quickly found its way back, this time buoyed by new political and social spaces.*

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Mwapembwa, now a household name for his hard-hitting editorial cartoons, came up with a new puppet satire show. Inspired by the hugely popular French show, *Les Guignols de l'Info* (The News Puppets), the XYZ Show features latex puppets modelled after Kenyan politicians and prominent personalities. The setup features a spoof newscast with presenter Keff Joinange (after former CNN journalist Jeff Koinange) and ends with a parody of a popular song by politicians, satirising a specific situation. By November 2015, XYZ Show had run more than 100 episodes over the course of six years, with a viewership of over 10 million.

In one of XYZ Show's 2008 post-election skits, then President Mwai Kibaki and his




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At its most basic, political satire is born from the idea that mocking politicians who behave badly can force them to change. But satire has also been a form of collective memory in a society where amnesia is a political philosophy, and finding new and interesting ways to hold politicians accountable is a core role.

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antagonist Raila Odinga are depicted as a couple visiting a marriage counsellor: former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan. The counsellor is often frustrated by the power plays in the relationship and becomes visibly impatient. The skit demystified a bloody national power struggle as a selfish fight between two men. In making such an important point with such a light touch, the skit also served as an outlet for the growing tensions which would, eventually, leave over 1,000 people dead.

At its most basic, political satire is born from the idea that mocking politicians who behave badly can force them to change. But satire has also been a form of collective memory in a society where amnesia is a political philosophy, and finding new

and interesting ways to hold politicians accountable is a core role.

The puppet caricature of Deputy President William Ruto on XYZ often appears with a roasted maize cob in his breast pocket, a snide call-back to the maize scandal that happened when he was minister of agriculture. At other times, he is depicted against the backdrop of a private jet, which refers to travel scandal christened “Hustler Jet”. Members of parliament are often depicted as pigs, as a testament of their avarice. In Kenyan social spaces, “MPigs” is a derisive reference to legislators. Drawing from all these sources in the political environment, Gado makes the politicians make fun of themselves.

Indeed, the political environment sometimes churns its own satire, requiring little or no mediation. In the Friday night news segment, Bull’s Eye, the initial presenter, Emmanuel Juma, cherry-picked news items from the preceding week and mashed them into a hilarious perspective. Former President Kibaki was an endless source of comic material, especially in his off-the-cuff remarks. Juma was never short of raw material and often used clips that may have been edited from the main bulletins. Where the president castigates cattle thieves as “*binadamu ya mavi ya kuku*” (human beings made from chicken shit), not much more is required from the satirist.

## Everybody’s Duty

The audience has become the satirist in the digital age, as the internet has greatly expanded the space for political satire. Where early Kenyan satirists had to conceptualise the rules of their art, audiences now

lead in content creation. A crowd favourite are memes that mock specific situations, especially potentially explosive issues and scandals. By caricaturing the punchlines that politicians and political spaces themselves create, audiences become more critical of their political environments.

Although this expanded space for political humour has encouraged more political awareness, it is still not powerful enough to force fundamental political change. In the run-up to the 2013 elections, satirists across different mediums tried to inspire audiences to make bold decisions in their elective choices. Their main target: presidential candidate Uhuru Kenyatta and his running mate William Ruto, two figures called before the International Criminal Court for their alleged roles during the violence following the 2007 election. The Star's editorial cartoonist depicted the two men using computers behind prison bars, ostensibly to govern. In his editorial cartoons, Gado always depicted them wearing a ball and chain. The XYZ Show depicted the marriage between Kenyatta and Ruto with a wedding sketch where the couple pledge themselves "through sickness and in the Hague". But, beyond raising laughter, none of these seem to have had a material effect on the couple's eventually successful election campaign.

Since the 2013 election, politicians in Kenya are on the internet as well. With a younger generation of politicians, online satire seems to have a more direct impact on policy and governance. Twitter hashtags often emerge as organic, crowd-sourced forms of political satire. #IsUhuruInKenya mocked the fourth president's frequent trips at a time of deteriorating governance, and gave birth to a website which carries only a

single response to the question, depending on whether the president is in the country or not. Seemingly innocent but inherently satirical, it triggered the wrath of government censors before public outrage brought it back. The next month, the president's itinerary included month-long stopovers in different parts of the country. It was a quiet, unsung victory.

#WhatWouldMagufuliDo celebrates the austere ways of Tanzania's new president, John Magufuli, and Tanzania's new mantra "*Hapa Kazi Tu*" (Here there is only work), invariably in comparison with the run-away corruption and spending of Kenya's government. The hashtag expressed desire for a new political order, one that seeks to reduce the burden on the citizenry and focuses its energies on productivity and development. Combined with the issue of the Kenyan president's frequent trips, the



-Vo- @INKREDIBO - 30 Dec 2015

Haha RT @SirNdekeo: #UhuruInKenya #BestTBTs2015



Tanzanian slogan was changed through a brilliant Kiswahili word play to “*Hepa Kazi Tu*” (You only run away from work).

In 2013, #BabaWhileYouWereAway took the opportunity of opposition leader Raila Odinga's return from a 2-month sojourn in the United States to revisit issues that had happened during that time. It combined humorous jokes, memes, and videos with retrospection.

Kenya's fervent adoption of social media has allowed the online emergence of community spaces of the kind envisioned by early satirists such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The hashtag #KOT, for #KenyansOnTwitter, blurs the line between satirist and audience and, through humour and bitter irony, builds a social vent to express and emphasise political messages. The current crop

of politicians knows and understands this power, and often fetches its material from issues being discussed online.

The traditional role of political satire in the news media has been reduced. Some cartoonists and writers have found new online forums that are more appreciative of their work. But it remains that the task of the political satirist, whether in cartoons, music, online, theater or columns, is to provide fresh, funny and insightful perspectives to dissect themes and bust myths. To do so, the satirist must always first be a keen observer of his or her environment. As Gado once told the BBC, “I think it's everybody's duty. You can't put that responsibility on one individual, as every Kenyan should contribute to expose what is happening and to expose corruption.”<sup>3</sup> ■■■

1 The Nairobi Reporter (2013). Controversial Editor, George Githii whose incisive pen upset Daniel Arap Moi regime. Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January 2016 from <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000085375/controversial-editor-george-githii-whose-incisive-pen-upset-daniel-arap-moi-regime>.

2 Kebaya, Charles. Historicizing Kenyan Comedy. Source <http://tundra.csd.sc.edu/iteration/kenyan-comedy>.

3 CNN (2011). *African Voices: Gado*. <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/11/04/africanvoices.gado/index.html?iref=24hours>.

# Laughing Out Loud:

## The Power and Pitfalls of Political Satire in Nigeria

Rudolf Ogoo Okonkwo

On 18 December 2011, a video emerged on social media that showed the richest pastor in Africa, the general overseer of the Living Faith Christian Church International (aka Winners Chapel), Bishop David Oyedepo, slapping a young Nigerian woman in his church for saying that she was “a witch for Jesus”. Within a few days, the video had gone viral. Nigerians were deeply divided on whether the pastor’s actions were justified. A few days later, Oyedepo doubled down in a new video where he not only asserted his right to slap anyone but also suggested that his ministry was outside the jurisdiction of Nigerian law. He even proclaimed that it was his duty to slap and vowed to slap other “witches”.

In response, the Dr Damages Show, a weekly satirical television programme, decided to alter the image a bit and produced a parody where the bishop slapped the president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan. With the president kneeling down and the bishop lording it over him, slapping him and querying him, the show forced its viewers to confront the full ramifications of the issue and to reassess their positions on Oyedepo’s actions. The reaction was instantaneous and overwhelming – since its release, the clip has remained the number one video on Sahara TV, with over a million views on YouTube.

Satire has become a powerful tool in a country where people are used to laughing and shaking their heads in frustration and disbelief at the same time. But not every parody is guaranteed the same success. As the renowned Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare, who for several decades has been a vehe-

ment champion of free speech and artistic activism, observes, “Satire is an arousal of consciousness. It is a dangerous art because you must not take for granted that everybody has your kind of sense of humour or that every person has the same capacity for reading between the lines.”

For example, when Pius Adesanmi, who has been tagged “the god of Nigerian satire”, penned a piece about Cardinal John Onaiyekan’s sociopolitical crusade of “speaking truth to power”, not all Nigerians were amused. Many read the piece literally without knowing that Adesanmi is a Catholic and that the cardinal is his family friend. “When it was first published by Sahara Reporters,” Adesanmi recalls, “all hell broke loose! The Catholic faithful in Nigeria rose against me for daring to attack the cardinal! A revered father wrote a rejoinder. My mother was swarmed with messages and phone calls! But of course the cardinal had a good laugh!”

Adesanmi believes that “the Nigerian environment is very hostile to reading and intellectual work. But if you can make people laugh, your chances of being read increase exponentially. However, you have to also pray that the underlying message is not lost to the reader – which happens. It is a trade-off.”

Okey Ndibe is the author of novels such as *Foreign Gods, Inc.* and *Arrows of Rain* and has been a regular political columnist for three decades. He deploys satire sparingly. Acknowledging that “in Nigeria’s situation – the absurdities and paradoxes of a country that has all it takes to soar but is stuck crawling – satire recommends itself”, he laments that Nigerians’ satiric imagination is terribly underdeveloped. At the



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*Still from "President Goodluck Jonathan inside the toilet at OAU 50 Anniversary in Addis Ababa".*  
© Sahara TV

same time, Ndibe believes that Nigerians' robust sense of humour, in spite of the harsh human conditions under which they live, is not an accident. He calls it a survival strategy. "So Nigerians say, 'No wahala' ('There's no trouble/strife'), 'Nothing spoil' ('Things are not bad'), 'We full ground' ('We're thriving'), 'Naija no dey carry last' ('Nigerians never fail'). It's all a rhetorical way of being defiant at life. It's an irreverent, ingenious mode of looking at a tragic social condition – a manual for laughing at your misfortunes as well as your fellows. You learn to do that, or you die of despair."

In "If Mandela were a Nigerian", Ndibe imagines the late great hero as a Nigerian politician. It became one of his most widely read pieces: "The epistle, I think, opened many Nigerians' eyes to the reality that god does not owe their country another favour (after the oil and other resources), and that we all, to one degree or another, created the mess in Nigeria."

Poets and writers have also deployed the power of satire to get their messages across. Osundare, the 2014 recipient of Nigeria's highest academic award, the Nigerian

National Merit Award for Academic Excellence, has used irony to great effect. His poem, "Not my business", written during the brutal Abacha dictatorship of the 1990s, pokes fun at a yam-eating political elite that has left nothing for the masses. It still holds a lot of meaning in today's Nigeria:

What business of mine is it  
So long they don't take the yam  
From my savouring mouth?

Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, in such plays as *The Trial of Brother Jero*, *Madmen and Specialists*, and *A Play of Giants*, also used satire to dissect the responsibilities that come with leadership and the devastation that results when these are relinquished in a continent besieged by corruption and confusion.

In 1984, Soyinka took it to a different level by assembling a group of musicians to record an album called *I Love My Country*. In the song *Etiko Revo Wettin?*, Soyinka satirised the political elite in Nigeria and their penchant for corruption:

You tief one kobo, dey put you for  
prison  
You tief one million, na patriotism  
Dem go give you chieftaincy and  
national honour  
You tief even bigger, dem go say na  
rumour  
Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop  
Sweet pounded yam – some day 'e  
go stop!

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*It's all a rhetorical way of being defiant at life.  
It's an irreverent, ingenious mode of looking at  
a tragic social condition – a manual for laughing  
at your misfortunes as well as your fellows. You  
learn to do that, or you die of despair.*

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With the explosion of social media and Nollywood's dominance as the entertainment of choice, new ways have emerged to capture the daily contradictions of a nation that is so blessed, yet so poor. Especially during President Jonathan's term, new online political parody entrepreneurs flooded the media landscape.

On 4 May 2014, Patience Jonathan, the emotional wife of the president, broke down in tears while questioning the authenticity of reports that more than two hundred Chibok students were abducted by Boko Haram fighters. Her performance immediately went viral and produced some of the most colourful Jonathan-era expressions, such as "Na only you waka come?" ("Did you come alone?"). She provided fodder for political satirists for weeks on end.

A year before, in May 2013, President Jonathan failed to address an African Union assembly that marked the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). With no public explanation given for Jonathan missing his speaking slot, the Dr Damages Show offered its own: "President Goodluck Jonathan inside the toilet at OAU 50 Anniversary in Addis Ababa". This video attracted almost 900 000 views on YouTube. Since then, Jonathan and his successor, Muhammadu Buhari, have made it a point of duty to explain their whereabouts at any time. This is considered a victory for political satire.

Right from the beginning of indigenous Nigerian television production, satire was a major part of the line-up. During military regimes, satire was more prevalent and fuelled by anger. From 1985 to 1990, Ken Saro-Wiwa wrote and produced *Basi and Company*, a sitcom on NTA that lampooned

corruption. Today, Adeola Fayehun, the creator and host of *Keeping It Real with Adeola*, continues the tradition. She uses satire mainly for the enjoyment of herself and her viewers. "If I'm too serious, people would just be depressed," she says. "I don't think I would want to keep listening to someone if the person makes me depressed."

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*With the explosion of social media and Nollywood's dominance as the entertainment of choice, new ways have emerged to capture the daily contradictions of a nation that is so blessed, yet so poor.*

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In a 2011 survey of 53 countries, Nigerians emerged as the happiest people. They scored 70 points for optimism while Britain was measured at a pessimistic -44. But that was when oil was selling at over USD 90 per barrel and President Jonathan was settling in with a truckload of promises for a better tomorrow. This year, with the crude oil price hovering around USD 30 and the promises of Buhari's government virtually a burst, Nigerians ranked 103 on the list of the world's happiest peoples. It is not that Nigerians are not laughing anymore. It is just that the fronts for humour are not as clear-cut as before. With an economy in freefall, and realisations that the terror in the North East won't go away fast and that the civil service cannot match the promises made for a corruption-free government, Nigerians are slowly taking in the reality that citizens are required to take action to address governance problems. When reality is no longer



*Keeping It Real! with Adeola Fayehun.*  
© Sahara TV

black and white – oppressed versus government, poor versus rich – laughter no longer provides a remedy without side-effects.

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The satire of the past that emphasised laughter for laughter's sake is giving way to something more purposeful.

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The minister of state for petroleum resources, Ibe Kachikwu, recently lashed out in frustration that he was not a magician and that Nigerians must wait for two months to see an end to fuel scarcity. Immediately, memes appeared that made fun of him and his arrogance in speaking down to Nigerians. This soon morphed into political

calls for his resignation – for something politicians in the past used to get away with. In a matter of days, he apologised and promised to bring an end to the fuel scarcity problem in two weeks. As I write, and the count-down approaches, satirists sharpen their pencils and salivate for a new round of the onslaught.

One thing is clear to everyone involved in Nigeria's political scene: this is not our grandfathers' Nigeria anymore. With worsening human conditions, Nigerian satire may be facing a crisis of identity. The satire of the past that emphasised laughter for laughter's sake is giving way to something more purposeful. A robust new satire is emerging, one that demands laughter but also compels people to insist on a transformation of their dire circumstances. ■■■

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Thierry Fontaine was born in La Réunion in 1969. He now lives and works in Paris. Thierry has exhibited at MoMA PS1 (New York), the Villa Medici (Rome) and the Kunst-Werke Institute (Berlin).

His photo-works combine elements of sculpture, performance and documentary. Thierry's self-portraits contrive to erase his own presence and identity from the image by covering his face or body in the sand, clay or volcanic mud of the place in which the works are made. In doing so, he transforms himself into a sculptural object; a conjunct of person and place.

His themes develop from concerns of personal identity and cultural definition, and the relation of both to geographical location.

