

"TELL YOUR NEIGHBOUR LIFE IS VERY TRICKY": PERFORMING THE CITY IN SWAHILI COMEDY SHOWS IN NAIROBI

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Abstract

There has been phenomenal growth in the entertainment and creative industries in Kenya, especially since the turn of this millennium. The emergence and rising popularity of comedy shows in the country attests to this trend. To illustrate this development in Kenya, this paper offers a close reading of performances by MCA Tricky, a comedian who appears on Churchill Show, which is broadcast on Nation Television (NTV) and whose recorded videos are available on the YouTube channel of the same name. Focusing on various aspects of humor and the trickster motif, the multilayered nuances and meanings of these performances are examined. Based on everyday life experiences, the Kenyan audience can easily identify with and relate to the jokes and comedy of MCA Tricky. MCA Tricky satirizes the actions and choices of various characters in the urban space of Nairobi, including the street boys, whom his persona exemplifies. Following Bakhtin's notion of "carnavalesque," the comic performances of MCA Tricky can be considered as subversions of dominant narratives and political power. These comedies generate humor particularly due to how Tricky fashions his persona along the lines of the trickster figure, found in many traditional African oral narratives, through the use of such techniques as parody, paronyms, puns, and ellipsis. By mocking their actions and ways of thinking, Tricky lets members of the audience laugh at their own miscalculations and bad decisions. At the same time, the audience can obtain insight into situations in their lives that are similar to the ones Tricky dramatizes. Just as his stage name suggests, the performances of MCA Tricky portray him as tricky and streetwise. Ironically, he often finds himself in tricky circumstances. For instance, in the episode where he addresses a letter to the president with the aim of applying for employment, the boundaries separating two social categories—the ordinary person and the political elite—are demolished. But this closeness to the presidency, albeit through epistolary form, does not alter his status as a street boy. All in all, most of MCA Tricky's performances help to promote a democratic mindset among the citizenry, since the underprivileged can be seen here to subvert hegemonic discourses. To arrive at these conclusions, I outline nine steps in one of MCA Tricky's performances, "MCA Tricky Writes A Letter to the President." Clearly, what this episode exemplifies is that comedy serves the dual function of entertainment as well as sociopolitical critique.

Keywords: Comedy, Humor, Audience, Performance, Everyday, Language, City, Nairobi

Introduction

Though stand-up comedy may be considered a recent phenomenon in Kenyan television, there has been remarkable growth in the popularity of this form of entertainment, especially during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Alongside mainstream media like television, talented young comedians have also been using various forms of social media to showcase their prowess in creating humor from day-to-day happenings that may be considered mundane. Such everyday occurrences are important, as they are the fodder that sustains comedy. Recent studies (Kebaya, 2013; Mbogo, 2012 and 2015; Otieno, 2013) underscore the importance and contribution of comedy to the growth of creative industries in Kenya. Indeed, the popularity of comedy clearly affirms that the genre is not merely meant for entertainment, but is also an effective means of influencing the audience to reflect upon their own weaknesses and idiosyncrasies. Moreover, stand-up comedy of the sort that this paper analyzes can be considered as a powerful critique of sociocultural and political realities. Some studies, for instance, consider ethnicity in Kenyan comedy in a positive manner, arguing that ethnic-flavored jokes contribute to inoffensive humor (Micheka & Muaka, 2016). What these studies effectively do is underscore the fact that ethnicity is inseparable from language. However, there are some studies that consider ethnicity in Kenyan comedy negatively, arguing that ethnic-based humor only perpetuates ethnic stereotypes. Such critics argue that comedy based on ethnic stereotypes causes more harm than humor (Ndonye et al., 2015).

This paper, however, makes a complete departure from the view that ethnicity can have adverse effects on the audience. Instead of lamenting the so-called negative ethnicity, the diversity of ethnicity is something that can actually be celebrated. One thing that Kenyan stand-up comedians such as MCA Tricky succeed in is that they allow the audience to laugh at their own ethnic differences and idiosyncrasies. To echo African American parlance, Kenyan stand-up comedy becomes a platform where the audience can laugh rather than cry about their day-to-day predicaments. Ethnic humor can therefore be considered as a framework through which comedians are able to create hilarious jokes without offending the audience. Following Bakhtin's concept of the "carnival," the comedies of MCA Tricky can be read as a form of mockery of the hierarchical order found in the urban space of Nairobi, as well as in other settings in Kenya. As such, the performances of MCA Tricky become metonymic representations of Kenyan society as a whole. This is actually what MCA Tricky dramatizes in almost all of his performances, as illustrated in the episode "MCA Tricky Writes A Letter to the President."

Before delving into the analysis of this episode, it is important to note that if tragedy gives us a tragic view of the world through the actions and ultimate fall of the tragic hero, comedy provides an alternative perspective whereby the reality of everyday experiences is portrayed through humor. In so doing, comedy can help to change attitudes and behavior in society. This is because when human weakness or vice is subjected to ridicule, people will laugh at their own folly with little or absolutely no offense intended. It is from this perspective that the stand-up comedies of MCA Tricky can be appreciated. It should also be noted that one aspect of convergence in comedy and tragedy is that the world presented in comedy is the same as the one presented in tragedy. Nonetheless, the fundamental difference between the two lies in

the perspective through which that world is portrayed in each of them. In his treatise *Poetics*, Aristotle observes that both comedy and tragedy represent the world mimetically: while tragedy "is an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and proposes magnitude set in the world of people of substance, comedy deals with people who are 'low' by nature" (Stott, 2005, p. 10). The two forms of representation are of equal importance, since they offer a complete image of the nature of humanity as "an amalgamation of two competing facets of character" (Stott, 2005, p. 20). As such, neither of the two dramatic forms of representation is superior or inferior to the other. Aristotle's view is different from that of Plato, who denigrated comedy in the *Republic*, since his main objective was to cultivate "the ideal person in the ideal state" (Stott, 2005, p. 19). This notwithstanding, it should be noted that the importance of comedy cannot be underestimated, since comedy presents us with experiences of the real, everyday world, as the performances of MCA Tricky dramatize. In the following section, we look briefly at the persona of MCA Tricky.

The Comedian: MCA Tricky

MCA Tricky is a stand-up comedian whose performances appear on the weekly *Churchill Show* program that is aired on Nation Television every Sunday between 7:30pm and 9pm. Live performances of the program are recorded on Thursdays at Nairobi's Carnivore Grounds. Recorded videos are available on the Churchill Show YouTube channel. In a 2010 survey conducted by InterMedia, *Churchill Show* was ranked as the most popular comedy show in Kenya, with approximately five to seven million viewers. This paper focuses on MCA Tricky due to the unique and humorous ways that he presents his jokes on the *Churchill Show*; the techniques that he employs include parody, paronyms, puns, ellipsis, ethnic accents, facial expressions, and costumes, all of which make his performances hilarious and appealing to the audience.

One outstanding feature of Tricky's performances is the way he manipulates the thinking and expectations of his audience. In so doing, he succeeds in establishing a rapport with his live audience, particularly with his signature phrase *Geukia mwenzako na umwambie tricky sana* (translated as "Turn to your neighbor and tell him/her that [life] is very tricky"). Therefore, from the onset, this dramatic opening line allows the comedian to initiate a dialogue with his audience, who become both the participants as well as the targets of his jokes. The seemingly casual manner in which he delivers punchlines and surprises throughout his performances is something that elicits spontaneous laughter. One case in point is when he describes the excruciating process of looking for employment in the city. The spectators expect Tricky to say that it is important to have a job in order to survive in this urban world; however, Tricky surprises them by saying that money, not work, is all one needs to make it on the streets of Nairobi. Later in this paper, I shall illustrate how Tricky achieves this. Indeed, this is how stand-up comedy is meant to function, in the sense that things that may look so obvious or commonplace are foregrounded. Rather than relying on a well-rehearsed script, most of MCA Tricky's performances are based on a story line that he improves and improvises upon while on stage.

Stage Name and Persona

Popularly known by his stage name, MCA Tricky, the comedian was born in 1993 and grew up in the coastal city of Mombasa, Kenya. “MCA” means “Member of Chokoras Assembly.” Clearly, this name is a parody of the title of the political leaders known as members of the county assembly (MCAs). These leaders are elected to represent the smallest or lowest region of administration, called a “ward.” There are forty-seven counties in Kenya; depending on the size, each county comprises a number of wards. Since the comedian does not explain the meaning of the initials “MCA” when introducing himself, most members of the audience assume that Tricky is using the acronym in the Kenyan political meaning. This notwithstanding, his stage name suggests that he is the bona fide representative of the other street boys. His real name is Francis Munyao. The last born in a family of three, and a younger brother to two elder siblings, Tricky attended Ikungu Primary School in Makindu, Machakos County. But it was at the tender age of twelve years old that he abandoned school and ventured into the harsh reality of street life. After running away from home, he joined a group of street boys who convinced him to accompany them to Nairobi in search of greener pastures. Although his performances appear spontaneous and improvised, it is these experiences as a street boy that Tricky recreates, becoming the subject of his own comedies. On December 20, 2019, during Kenyatta University’s forty-seventh graduation ceremony, Munyao graduated from the institute with a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering. In none of his stage appearances, however, does the character played by MCA Tricky ever reveal or betray the identity or profession of the actor himself.

Naming is an important element in any creative work, such as drama or narrative fiction. This is because the audience or readers come to know characters through their names. Naming is indeed crucial in the fictional world, just as in the real world, because it is a name that affords the individual a sense of identity. Some names can be symbolic in the sense that they bear nuances of a character’s traits and personality. This seems to be the case with the comedian MCA Tricky: in this sense, through his name and character, MCA Tricky signifies and ridicules the “tricky” ways of the Kenyan politician known as the member of the county assembly (MCA). Although he presents himself as the streetwise leader of a street gang, he can be considered a trickster who uses all manner of artifice to survive on the treacherous streets of Nairobi, perhaps in the same way the politician (MCA) manoeuvres his way through the Kenyan political landscape. In order to endear himself to and create rapport with the audience, MCA Tricky begins all his performances with the phrase *Geukia mwenzako umwambie tricky sana*, loosely translated as “Turn to your neighbor and tell him/her that [life] is very tricky.” For sure, this introductory opening line ushers the audience into the “tricky” urban world that the comedian imagines.

The use of stage names is a common practice among artists. Some of the Kenyan comedians who use stage names on *Churchill Show* include Churchill himself, aka Mwalimu King’ang’i; and Professor Hamo, Teacher Wanjiku, Captain Otoyoy, Jalang’o, Jemutai, Mammito, Jasper, Sleepy David, David the Student, MC Jessy, Adhis Jojo, Chipukeezy, Smart Joker, YY, and

Njoro. Using stage names allows each of these comedians to create a unique persona that the audience can easily identify. It also becomes a way of creating a personal brand, through which many of them have launched careers in other areas such as radio, television, and advertisement.

Stand-up Comedy

Before proceeding to the analysis of MCA Tricky’s performances, it is important to briefly mention what stand-up comedy entails. Stand-up comedy is essentially meant to be performed for live audiences. Mintz (2005) notes that “stand-up comedy is live performance in which a comedian tells jokes and/or behaves in a manner designed to generate laughter, often ridicule, either directed at the comic persona or directed by the persona at others or at social issues and topics familiar to the audience” (Mintz, quoted in Charney, 2005, p. 575). Following Mintz, Tricky’s comic performances can be read as both critique of and commentary on sociocultural and political issues that his urban audience can easily identify. In stand-up comedy, the comedian stands in front of an audience, performing a one-man show for a short duration, say between five and ten minutes. Basically, the comedian presents a series of jokes based on incidents that the audience can easily identify. A complete performance is referred to as a “set.” Usually, this set is rehearsed so that the performer can get acquainted with his or her lines. All the same, it should be noted that during the actual performance, the comedian must allow room for spontaneity. In this way, the performer ensures that the entire show appears to the audience as if it is spontaneous. Other characteristics of stand-up comedy in Kenya include the use of ethnic accents, stereotypes, costumes, slapstick, gestures, and facial expressions. Using ethnic accents, for instance, a comedian may imitate how a renowned politician talks. Other ways in which stand-up comedians imitate politicians is through costume, where the style of dress is used to caricature the country’s leaders. The costumes are designed in such a way as to look absurd and ridiculous, something that can elicit laughter from the audience even before the comedian has started talking. This is one strategy that MCA Tricky has perfected: his trademark costume includes an oversized gray coat, a red T-shirt, a knee-length pair of shorts, and open shoes that he wears without socks. The clothes are creased, suggesting that they have been retrieved from a garbage can or that they are donations from a well-wisher. In one episode, MCA Tricky suggests that he has collected the oversized coat from a garbage can outside State House, the official residence of the president, implying that it might once have been worn by the president himself. His unkempt hair completes the picture of the street urchin that the comedian represents on stage.

As far as language is concerned, Tricky delivers his performances in the Swahili language. But his language is unique in the sense that it is heavily inflected with the ethnic accent of the Kikuyu community of Kenya. The stereotype this is intended to confer on Tricky is that of a streetwise character who is always ready to manipulate the people and situations around him for his own benefit. Tricky uses Sheng in addition to Swahili, giving the performances a unique blend of style and delivery, and making it possible for the audience to easily recognize the jokes. His character is that of a street boy who has little understanding of the English

language. For him, competence in the English language not only means that one is educated, but it also marks a certain social category—the middle class, who are often the target of Tricky’s jokes. Using caricature and exaggeration, he portrays situations that require wit to maneuver his way out of them. In almost all cases, Tricky makes the wrong moves or bad choices, culminating in “tricky” endings that make the audience laugh at both the comedian as well as themselves. Besides hyperbole, other linguistic devices that Tricky uses in his performances include word play and puns. Through such techniques, he is able to play with the mind of the audience, ultimately duping them.

The Subject of Tricky’s Performances

As I have indicated above, Tricky’s jokes are based on story lines or short anecdotes. One feature that makes Tricky’s performances so appealing and entertaining is how he recreates real-life experiences, rendering the stories to his audience in hilarious ways. Following Michel Certeau, one may argue that comedy is derived from the stories and experiences that people encounter every day (Certeau, 1984). Aside from drawing inspiration from his own experiences, the comedian also researches his content to find out what might appeal to the audience. With his persona as the bona fide leader and spokesperson of the street gang, Tricky seems to wield power over them. At the same time, he employs wit as a survival tactic, displaying his prowess as the most streetwise fellow in the entire gang. This is clearly evident from the role he assumes when the gang meets to write a letter to the president. In line with the nature and characteristics of stand-up comedy described above, MCA Tricky’s performances are based on a specific story line. He presents this previously rehearsed and memorized sketch to the audience, pausing at given moments to allow for reactions.

The complexities of the urban setting are fodder for Kenyan comedy. Almost all long-running comedy shows on Kenyan television are based on experiences in the city. To cite some examples, *Vioja Mahakamani*, *Vitimbi*, *Papa Shirandula*, *Inspector Mwala*, *Auntie Boss*, and *The Real House Helps of Kawangware* are all set within the geographical space of Nairobi. These settings include the court and middle-class neighborhoods as well as city slums. Mbogo observes:

“These characters in their quest to circumvent the hustles of a complex and unforgiving urban setting resort sometimes to “rural” habits that are more familiar to them. While trying to better their contemporary urban dwellers who are seen as competitive and better placed to acquire the rewards of understanding the urban space, some of the characters employ trickery.” (Mbogo, quoted in Njogu, 2015, p. 10)

Following Mbogo, MCA Tricky can be viewed as a character who is employing all the tricks in his bag to navigate his way around the city of Nairobi. These strategies of survival come in handy even when he meets other street boys upon his visit to Kisumu city. In order to survive this otherwise hostile city life, Tricky must inevitably go along with the twists and turns of the streets of Nairobi, which Mbogo describes as “an urban setting that is constantly shifting and therefore challenging and difficult to understand” (Mbogo, quoted in Njogu, 2015, p. 10).

Nine Steps in the Episode "MCA Tricky Writes a Letter to the President"

The episode discussed here lasts for a span of nine minutes and thirty-nine seconds. In this performance, Tricky narrates to the audience how he is writing a letter to the president with the aim of applying for a job. To begin with, Tricky engages the audience in dialogue, explaining why he so desperately needs a job:

Tricky: *Si mnajua vile ni Tricky kukaa hii Nairobi bila ka—?*

Audience: *Kazi!*

Tricky: *Bila kakitu! Unaweza kuwa na kazi na hauna kakitu!* [Laughter and applause from the audience.] *Tumekuwa tukitafuta job huku Nairobi na hatupati.*

Tricky: Do you know how tricky it is to survive in Nairobi without *ka—?*

Audience: *Kazi* ["a job"]!

Tricky: Without *kakitu* ["something small," i.e. money]! This is because you can have a job and still be broke! So we have been looking for a job here in Nairobi, but with no success.

In this prologue, the dominant technique Tricky employs is that of ellipsis. This technique entails starting a word or sentence, then giving the audience a chance to guess and complete what he intends to say. This conversational device is common, especially among Kenyans, when one is describing an incident, such as a car accident one has witnessed. Tricky starts the word, pauses, and then turns to the audience to complete it. Nonetheless, in almost all such instances, the audience gets the wrong word, which, in fact, is Tricky's intention, as in the case above.

What does the audience's response reveal? Several things emerge from this style of conversation between the performer and the audience. First, it reveals the expectations of the audience, who anticipate the obvious. They are quick to respond or complete the word without much reflection. At this point, the audience breaks into spontaneous laughter upon realizing that they have fallen into Tricky's trap. In this instance, they are actually laughing at themselves. Secondly, there is an incongruence between the audience's anticipations and the reality of the situation being described, which itself is the punchline of the joke. Tricky's intention is to trick the audience into thinking in a particular direction, then surprise them with the correct word or phrase at an opportune moment. Ultimately, because of their inability to think outside the box, the audience falls for Tricky's trap. After capturing the audience's attention and shifting them to a world of make-believe, Tricky proceeds to narrate how he led the street gang in the exercise of writing a letter to the president of Kenya.

Step 1: The motivation for seeking a job. It is at this point that Tricky explains why he is looking for a job. He starts by describing the problem of unemployment in contemporary Kenya. He is a representative for other street boys who are jobless just like him. So he starts by saying, *Nimekuwa nikitafuta kazi pamoja na Redde yangu* ("I have recently been hunting

for a job together with my *redde*). *Redde* is a Sheng word derived from the Kikuyu word *kĩrĩndĩ*, meaning a “group of people” or “the masses.” In this context, *redde* is used to refer to the street gang. Besides being the bona fide leader and representative, Tricky is the only one in the gang who is literate, which is why he writes the letter on behalf of the others.

Step 2: Why it is necessary to write an application letter. The second thing MCA Tricky does is explain why it is necessary to write a formal letter to apply for a job. The main reason one must write the letter, according to Tricky, is that someone once told him it is not possible to get a job without applying for one. Here, he pauses, turning to the audience to confirm whether this is true: *Ni ukweli?* (“Is this true?”) At this juncture, it is important to note that through use of dialogue, Tricky is seeking the audience’s participation in the performance. This technique also helps to confirm whether they are attentive and following the story. Tricky notes that it is Piento, one of the gang members, who has suggested that they should not give up, but should try their luck: *Tukiendelea ndio Piento kakasema tuendelea kujaribu bahati* (“As we were pondering what to do next, Piento suggested that we should continue to try our luck”). At this point, Tricky seems to digress, or so it appears, remarking that the word *bahati* (meaning “luck” or “the lucky one”) reminds him of the gospel musician known as Bahati. But he is not really digressing; this is actually an allusion within his narrative to his understanding of writing letters. Incidentally, Bahati has actually composed a song called “Barua” (meaning “letter”) where he addresses God in a letter. This song becomes an instant inspiration for Tricky. In the song, Bahati addresses God in a love letter, referring to Him as *daddy* and *mpenzi* (meaning “lover”). Taking this rhetorical question literally, Tricky dismisses the musician, claiming that Bahati does not have a clue as to how many letters he has written to God, as indicated in the opening line of the song “Barua”: *Ni barua ngapi nimeandika kwa njia ya muziki?* (“How many letters have I written down in the form of music?”) *Na nyimbo ngapi nimeandika zisizo za riziki* (“And how many not-for-profit songs have I written?”). In the song, the persona is asking God the rhetorical question of how many songs he has composed without any financial gain. His music career, he laments, has not allowed him to eke out a living. This clearly illustrates the numerous challenges facing musicians in Kenya; such challenges include piracy, resulting in poor remuneration for their music. Taking a cue from Bahati, Tricky notes that he has been forced by circumstance to submit to the excruciating bureaucracy of the job application process. In so doing, however, he subverts all the rules of the process. The task of writing the letter becomes easier, since all he needs to do is to copy a letter discovered in an abandoned suitcase. Inspired by Bahati, he breaks all protocol by taking the liberty to directly address the president in the letter. After all, if Bahati could address God, Tricky can likewise address the president.

Step 3: Why it is important to get a job. It is at this stage that Tricky explains the importance of getting a job, saying that it is so difficult to survive in the city when one is jobless; this is where the above-quoted dialogue (p. 8) is spoken. What Tricky is demonstrating here are the vagaries of city life, where it is possible to have a job and yet remain broke. All the same, he says that they have been painstakingly searching for a job in Nairobi, but to no avail.

Several issues emerge from this discourse between Tricky and his audience. First, Tricky is employing ellipsis and word play to create humor—yet at another level, he is doing this to surprise the audience, who are anticipating the obvious. Thus, the lingering question is, why do the listeners respond by saying *kazi* (“a job”)? Throughout the sketch, Tricky has been talking about a job (*kazi*), so it seems obvious that *kazi* is the right word to complete Tricky’s sentence. Just as his stage name suggests, Tricky is able to trick the audience, showing them they are wrong. Tricky challenges the audience’s assumption, saying that you can actually have a job, but still remain broke. Thus, Tricky underscores the ironies of everyday life in the city, where one can actually be employed but have no money to meet various financial obligations.

Step 4: Why it is Tricky who writes the letter. It is Tricky who is charged with the responsibility of writing the letter to the president. He does this on behalf of the entire gang. Given that he is the only literate member of the team he represents, he subverts all the rules of letter-writing. He decides to indicate the senders’ address as “P. O. Box Katunge,” which is greeted with laughter and applause from the audience; the letter he was copying from had indicated “P.O. Box 257.” His notion of the English word “box” is derived from the Sheng language, where seducing and winning the heart of a girl is referred to as *kuingiza msichana kwa box*, loosely translated as “trapping a girl in a box.” Tricky therefore wonders how the author of the other letter had managed to lure 257 women into his own “box,” despite all of them residing in the same locality, Thika. For this reason, Tricky decides to indicate his physical location as “Tricky Fan Base.” This punchline attracts yet more laughter and applause.

Step 5: What Tricky is requesting in the letter. Addressing the president as *prezzo* and *Mtukufu Uncle*, Tricky requests that the president hire his three colleagues. He pleads with the president to hire Piento for the marines or the navy; this is because Piento likes operating *chini ya maji* (literally translated as “under the water”). Tricky recommends that Otis be hired as an undercover agent, since his skin color is so dark that he cannot easily be seen by an enemy; he will only be visible when he comes to collect his monthly salary. Finally, Tricky suggests that Kamasleti, the only girl in the gang, be hired at the high court since—she is always “high”—as a replacement for the presiding chief justice. The name Kamasleti is derived from “slay queen,” which is Kenyan social media parlance for young girls in the city who enjoy showing off a particular lifestyle that they cannot afford to maintain. As such, they flaunt their beauty in exchange for the support of men with the requisite wherewithal. According to *Urban Dictionary*, the term “slay queen” is used to refer to “young and naïve girls who apparently do not date broke men. They spend hours on Snapchat and Instagram showing off things they do not even own.” What Tricky is suggesting here is that once the president hires the members of the street gang, they will enjoy a better lifestyle and the trappings associated with state power.

Step 6: Why Tricky does not request a position for himself. By the time he finishes writing the letter, Tricky has forgotten to ask for a job from the president, saying *mimi sitaki kazi* (“I do not want a job” or “I do not want work”). What does this suggest? This situation is rather tricky and ironic at the same time. Although Tricky wishes to change his status quo from a life of begging in the streets, he is not willing to work. His wish is that the president, who is the commander-in-chief, make him what he calls the “commander-in-sub-chief.” According to Tricky, this position will allow him to become the bodyguard of the first lady of the Republic of Kenya. Clearly, Tricky is lazy, but he doesn’t say so. He wishes and longs for a better life, yet he does not want to work. So was the process of writing a letter to the president an exercise in futility? In some way, Tricky helps to reveal the absurdity of the excruciating process of seeking a job in Nairobi. At the same time, his wishes for a better life could also apply to other people who are lazy and would only wish to have a better life without working hard for it.

Step 7: Waiting for the president’s response. Tricky proceeds to explain that they have been waiting for a reply from the State House in vain. Part of the reason is that they entrusted Bahati, the musician, with the task of delivering the letter to the president. They had considered Bahati to be more experienced and knowledgeable in matters to do with letters, since, as mentioned previously, he had written several letters to God. Incidentally, instead of taking the letter to the State House, Bahati has given it to a fellow musician known as Prezzo. “Prezzo” is the stage name of a flamboyant and controversial Kenyan musician known as Jackson Ngechu Makini. At this point, Tricky turns to the camera to address the president directly, since the letter project has not worked.

Step 8: The desperation of waiting turns Tricky to other ways of addressing the president. Tricky is not sure if the president has actually received the letter. Turning toward the backstage area, Tricky requests that “Uncle” Churchill help him address the president. Churchill does not show up on stage; he is nowhere to be seen. Tricky is alone and he looks desperate. In some sense, this seems to suggest the desperation many job-seekers have to endure as they hunt for jobs in the city. Somehow, Tricky is trying to suggest that one must resort to a relative or familiar network in order to secure employment. Moreover, the fortune and status of Tricky as a street boy do not change, despite the near-access he has had to the State House, the center of political power, in the form of the letter. The letter thus becomes a subtle way of breaking barriers and hierarchies between formal and informal.

Step 9: The punchline. Frustrated, Tricky turns to the audience once again and says that Churchill also cannot be seen, since he is too dark, just like Tricky. If both were to stand side by side, one would think that there was a corridor between them; their dark figures would not be recognized—a subtle parody of invisibility. After all, Tricky is suggesting that he is not only voiceless, but also remains invisible. He is both unheard and unseen, yet he is aware that the president is watching the show—the very reason why he addresses him through the camera.

Ending. Clearly, the ending of this episode is anticlimactic. What Tricky was undertaking was the futile exercise of writing a letter that was probably lost before it could reach its destination. We are back to where we started. Indeed, as Tricky reminds the audience at the start of the performance, “this life is very tricky!”

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the main reason why MCA Tricky is writing a letter to the president is to apply for a job. In this exercise, Tricky includes members of the street gang that he purports to represent. In this performance, just like in other episodes, Tricky employs several techniques to deliver his jokes to the audience. These include word play, puns, ellipsis, allusions, and imitations of ethnic accents. It is clear, for instance, that the punchlines of his jokes rest on the incongruence between the audience’s expectations and the actual lines Tricky delivers.

Using his signature introduction on stage, *Geukia mwenzako umwambie, Tricky sana* (“Turn to your neighbor and tell him/her that [life] is very tricky”), MCA Tricky endeavors to break the ice and connect with his audience. In terms of language, it has been noted that MCA Tricky performs his stand-up comedy using Swahili as well as Sheng. At the same time, the comedian uses ethnic accents to make his performances more humorous. In the end, along with entertaining the audience, he is also able to convey pertinent messages with sociopolitical relevance to them. As far as content is concerned, the performances of MCA Tricky are based on familiar anecdotes, current affairs, or trending events, often popularized through mainstream media as well as different social media platforms.

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