

POWER PERFORMANCE IN THE DIGITAL SPACE:

AN ANALYSIS OF KENYAN ONLINE COMEDY

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Abstract

The widespread global usage of various social media platforms has had a significant impact on life in general. This form of social interaction has also impacted significantly on the field of artistic creativity in terms of production, performance, circulation and engagement with artistic material. One key way in which digitization has impacted on life is that it has availed platforms for young users of digital technology to express their creativity in a manner that was largely not possible in the past. In Kenya, and in other countries as well, one observes that young people are now creating careers out of short performances on social media platforms such as Youtube, Tiktok and Instagram. In this context, my paper focuses on two separate comedy texts, namely Flaqa Raz aka flaqa411 and The Mama Njeri Show that debut the moniker Plesident Kingston. These two are performed by two Kenyan young people and circulated on Instagram and Youtube. The two comedies are set in family contexts and they mainly parody parent-youth relationships. My main focus of analysis is the portrayal of the parent figure in these texts against the portrayal of the same in traditional oral narratives and in newer but non-digital forms such as Mchongoano. This will be geared towards attempting to see how current popular Kenyan literature looks in relation to its variants of earlier times. Further to this, the paper hopes to investigate the question of power contest in artistic and digital spaces.

Introduction

The widespread global usage of various social media platforms has had a significant impact on artistic creativity in terms of production, performance, circulation and engagement with artistic material. A key impact of the digitization of communication is the availability of various platforms for youthful end-users of digital technology to express their creativity in ways that were largely not possible in the past. In Kenya, as elsewhere in the world, young people are now creating careers out of short performances on social media platforms such as You Tube, Tik Tok and Instagram.

In this context, my paper focuses on two separate comedy texts namely, *Flaqa Raz* (also called *Flaqa 411*) and *The Mama Njeri Show*. The two are performed by two young Kenyan artists, Erastus Ayieko Otieno and Brenda Jons, respectively. Both are set in family contexts and mainly portray parent-youth relationships. My main focus of analysis is how these digital art forms dramatize the contest for power and control between parents as a social institution and the youth as subjects of parental control. While focusing on digital comedies, this paper takes cognizance of older art forms in the Kenyan context, in particular, folktales and *mchongoano*, a Kenyan short oral art form. Bearing in mind that these earlier forms engaged and continue to engage with the question of power, my paper looks at how contemporary digital art forms deal with similar issues in the context of open and wide-spread digital media communication. I engage the question of power performance by using Michel Foucault's theory of the Panopticon to analyze the power matrix between parents and youthful children and to go further to interpret this as a metaphor for power relations within society. Basing my analysis on the two online dramatic comedies, I read parental authority as a panopticon used by parents to control the youth, and which the youth, in their turn, constantly attempt to challenge and dismantle.

The Principle of the Panopticon in Literature

Michel Foucault's theory of the panopticon is based on Jeremy Bentham's watch tower concept within the prison architecture which is reputed as the ultimate in controlling inmates by keeping them under constant surveillance (Bentham p.137). Foucault analyzes the watch tower closely in his text *Surveiller et punir* (1975). In the quotation below, we see a description of the panopticon which Foucault reads as a metaphor for various mechanisms of control in the nineteenth century and beyond:

... at the periphery, an annular building; at the center, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately (Foucault 2008, p.5).

Through the above description, Foucault clearly demonstrates how visibility is used as a trap. He argues further that in the 19th century, Bentham's concept of the physical prison architecture based on the principle of isolation, exclusion and control was extended to the general population as the exercise of power proper. He explains the power of visibility by pointing to its capability to create self-regulation, as he argues that "he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power" (2008, p.7).

In my analysis of the relationship between parents and children in the selected comedy shows, I seek to find out how parents execute surveillance as a means of exercising power and how the youth respond to this surveillance and thus use this to have a glimpse at the power matrix between institutions of authority and the subjects of that authority. I am interested in the comedy shows as works of art and how the dramatic strategies they employ can be read to understand the dynamics of this power play between the two categories. In a larger sense, this analysis does give cognizance to the fact that these comedies are disseminated within digital space which itself is a significant factor in the sense of the youthful audiences that are likely to dominate this space.

Creative literature utilizes the motif of surveillance as a way of engaging with varied issues including power, guilt and fear among others. A classic example is George Orwell's dystopic novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) in which surveillance is taken to extreme limits, mainly through the portrayal of the telescreen, a gadget in every house in Oceania, which watches everyone and transmits what it "sees" and "hears" to the government authorities. In African literature some examples include Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) in which the author satirizes state surveillance as embodied in the symbolically named characters such as Macho Kali "sharp eyes" and Sikio Kuu "top ear". In Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones are not yet Born* (1968), the nameless main protagonist is constantly aware of being watched and seen which is understood as a sense of inverted guilt due to his poverty and social impotence occasioned by his choice of the barren path of personal integrity in a society where most people enrich themselves through corrupt means.

Ensiech Shabanirad & Mahtab Dadkhan have examined the themes of surveillance and subversion in George Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Martin Scorsese's film, *Shutter Island*. They argue that expected behaviour is achieved not through total surveillance, but by

panoptic discipline and inducing a population to conform by the internalization of this reality (p.3). They also engage with the question whether there is a possibility for meaningful resistance and independent agency in the face of the all-pervasive disciplinary power.

They arrive at the conclusion that although state machinery ultimately triumphs, throughout Orwell's novel, there are a number of actions which amount to resistance, however minute. One example is the fact that Winston, the main protagonist in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "kept his back turned to the telescreen. It was safer; though, as he well knew, even a back can be revealing" (Orwell 3). Another case of resistance is that while facing the telescreen, Winston wore a particular expression: "He had set his features into the expression of quiet optimism which it was advisable to wear when facing the telescreen" (Orwell 4). Keeping a diary is yet another act of resistance on the part of Winston. Later we see more "radical" resistance when he accepts to engage in an illicit sexual liaison with Julia who is deliberately using her femininity and sexuality as tools of resistance against the party. While the ultimate benefit of Winston's resistance may remain nebulous, the fact remains that through his story, Orwell presents the role of literature in confronting the exercise of absolute power.

Art Attack: A Growing Boldness in Kenyan Artistic Performances

Admittedly, art has always been used to comment on the question of power relations in general and the relationship between parents and children (older vs younger generation) in particular. Various art forms perform this function in different ways. Folktales, for instance, primarily use symbolism and anthropomorphism and generally point out parental ills without the use of ridicule. In the case of *mchongoano*, the Kenyan verbal teaser, one observes the extensive use of humour and caricature to ridicule various authority figures including fathers, grandparents and teachers. It is notable, however, that *mchongoano* is hardly used to ridicule mothers as observed by various researchers including Wangari Mwai, Charles Kebaya & David Kimongo (2018), Musonye (2014) and Simon Peter Otieno (2006).

Traditional African oral narratives engage with the question of the relationship between parents and children through the use of human and non-human characters. A number of stories point out parental idiosyncrasies and criticize excesses of parental authority mainly through the use symbolism and anthropomorphism. One Kenyan oral narrative, *Simbi & Nashikufu*, will suffice

in illustrating this. This narrative is native to the Luhya community of Kenya and the particular rendition used for this analysis was recorded and transcribed by Kavetsa Adagala & Wanjiku Kabira (1985).

In *Simbi & Nashikufu*, the two sisters, Simbi and Nashikufu receive differential treatment from their parents: while Simbi is loved and pampered because she is very beautiful, Nashikufu is hated and ill-treated because she is ugly and hunch-backed. As a result of their different upbringing and treatment, Simbi grows up to be a snobbish and badly behaved young woman while Nashikufu grows up to be a well behaved and wise woman. Simbi rejects all the suitors who flock her father's compound because, according to her, none of them is good enough. Eventually, she declares that she would only accept to be married by a man who did not shit- a man without an anus! Consequently, she is tricked into getting married to an ogre but is rescued by her "ugly" sister who is able to see through the deception of the ogres who came transformed into handsome young men (without that offending part of the anatomy). Although the story deals with the folly of adults which eventually brings trouble to the children, the parents are not caricatured or directly ridiculed. Their folly is highlighted through their narrow self-interest which propels them to open hatred for their daughter, Nashikufu, who, according to them, has no prospects of bringing wealth while they are openly partial towards Simbi whose beauty, they expect, will bring in a lot of bride wealth.

Meaning in this narrative is communicated through the use of counter-balanced elements such as beauty vs ugliness, ogres vs humans and intelligence vs folly. The narrative also employs counter-balanced characters, for example, Simbi vs Nashikufu, the mother vs the grandmother and the old woman vs the toad. Ogres are immediately recognizable as symbols of evil which is often deceptively attractive to undiscerning humans. Simbi's parents' undiscerning nature is compounded by their materialistic ambitions which lead them to support their daughter in her abhorrent project of seeking a kind of husband who, by nature, cannot exist.

In this and many other traditional oral narratives anthropomorphism and symbolism are used to make social commentary. When humans contravene a critical social norm, the consequence is often in the form of slipping from the human world to the world of ogres. In this story the gullible humans are rescued from the ogre world by the ingenuity and intelligence of Nashikufu, the ugly and hated girl. During their escape back home, they are helped by the anthropomorphic

toad who swallows them and carries them across the river which separates human land and ogre land.

Oral narratives such as this one engage with the question of power between parents and children in a subtle way, using minimal or no ridicule or sardonic humour. Instead, they employ mystery, wonder and imagery –aspects that tend to hold the attention by the sheer enchanted and peculiar nature of the fictional world they present. A combination of symbolism and poetic justice is used to dramatize the detrimental effects of insensitive and over-bearing parental power. Compared to oral narratives, *mchongoano* appears to be more direct and bold in its social commentary.

Peter Githinji describes *mchongoano* as “verbal duel” (90), but it should be noted that this dueling is in jest so perhaps a more apt term of referring to *mchongoano* is “verbal teaser”. Its performance involves at least two participants where the first participant makes a teasing statement directed to the second who could be alone or part of a group which also forms the audience. The verbal teasers are formulaic in structure and their performance involves turn-taking. They consist of a two-part structure separated by the word “*hadi*” or “*mpaka*” (until/that). The structure itself is a syllogism with the first part acting as the premise and the second as the conclusion, as illustrated in the examples below:

*Ati nasikia uko na kichwa kuubwa **mpaka** ukikuja shule watoto wanakuita, ‘headboy’.*
(I hear you have such a big head **that** when you go to school the children call you ‘headboy’).

*Paka yenu ni mzee **mpaka** iko karibu kuwa dogi.*
(Your cat is so old **that** it is about to turn into a dog).

*Budako ni muoga **hadi** analala kama amekunja ngumi.*
(Your father is so fearful **that** he sleeps with his hands folded into fists).

*Ati budako ako na deni nyingi **hadi** anaitwa Denis.*
(I hear your Father has so many debts **that** he is called Denis).

Ati budako ni mzee hadi anatafuta death certificate.

(I hear your father is so old that he is looking for a death certificate).

Mchongoano mainly uses humour to ridicule social failings, lack of exposure and physical appearance among others. The key devices employed in the teasers include reversal, absurdity and exaggeration as can be observed in the above examples. *Mchongoano*, being a youth/children genre, is employed to challenge adults and other institutions of power either by making fun of characteristics such as lack of intelligence or exposure, advanced age and physical frailty. Although direct and often crude, these teasers have an underlying flippancy and lightheartedness which enable the criticisms they embody to be endured without undue fear of moral or psychological injury.

Godwin Ikyer discusses joke performance in the context of post-modernity among the Tiv people of North-Central Nigeria. He argues that there is a shift in the “texts and contexts of performance of jokes as a result of the cross-cultural experiences, interactions and identities resulting from urbanization and post-modern value configurations” (p.114). In the Kenyan context, the analysis of the two online comedies under discussion reveals a further shift as these comedies push the boundaries even more than earlier joke performances such as *mchongoano*. *The Mama Njeri Show* which consists of roughly three-minute skits posted on You Tube, is set in the home and the content reflects domestic or family themes. The show features three main characters: Mama Njeri (the main character) and her son, Kingston (a university student), and daughter, Njeri (a high school student). Though she is married, Mama Njeri is practically a single mother because her husband lives out of the country. She is an uneducated woman who makes a living through “hustling”, which in the Kenyan popular lingo is understood to mean engaging in small scale, informal and difficult economic activities.

The show mainly revolves around conflicts between her and her children, mostly her son, whom she sarcastically calls Plesident Kingston, a parody of the title “president”. This is a nick-name she has given him because, in her opinion, he behaves like a boss, doing little work and expecting to be served. Many of the episodes in the show feature only the main character, Mama Njeri, who is played by the young lady, Brenda Jons. The children are mostly outside of the

frame so the audience neither sees them nor hears their voices, but their words and actions can be implied from Mama Njeri's one-sided "dialogue".

Flaqa 411/Flaqa Raz also consists of roughly three-minute skits which are posted mainly on Instagram and You Tube. Similar to *The Mama Njeri Show*, most of the skits are set in the home and deal with domestic or family themes. The show features four main characters: Otis (the main character), his sister, Akoth, and their parents. Otis is a university student while Akoth is in high school. Otis' father is educated and likes to display his intellectual prowess through speaking impeccable English, reading the newspaper and explaining everything from a gaudy if phony intellectual perspective. The mother, on the other hand, is uneducated and speaks ordinary Kiswahili. The show mainly revolves around conflicts between Otis and his parents. All the characters are played by Erastus Ayieko Otieno, and are put together through editing.

Focus will now be directed at the conflicts dramatized in the comedy shows and how the dialogue, casting, costume and other dramatic strategies demonstrate the artistic boldness in these dramatic forms. I read the two shows as the youth's attempt to challenge institutional power by caricaturing parental surveillance. The conflicts in the comedy shows are mostly about mundane aspects of domestic life such as failure to perform house-hold chores, breaching time management expectations by waking up late or coming home late and taking too much time on the phone among other domestic squabbles. One episode from each show will be used for illustration.

In the selected episode from *Flaqa 411*, the conflict is about Otis breaching the daily routine as delineated in a timetable. For ease of reference I will refer to this episode as "Timetable". The episode presents Akoth studying when the mother walks in and inquires where Otis is and Akoth replies that he is in his bedroom, asleep. The mother decides to go to Otis' bedroom to "check what the problem with this child is". Shortly after, the father walks into the bedroom and sits down and the two parents begin talking. From their conversation, we learn that Akoth woke up at 5.00 am, did her morning chores and is now studying. As the parents enumerate his mistakes, Otis wakes up, but they order him to go back to sleep and pretend he does not know what is going on. The mother reports that Otis uses his phone during study time and that he spends most of his time either on YouTube or on the phone talking to a girl called Liza. The episode ends

with the father ordering him to follow the study timetable and daily routine and consequently his phone is confiscated by the mother.

In the selected *The Mama Njeri Show* episode, the conflict is between Kingstone and the mother over his use of the phone. I shall refer to this episode as “Phone”. The episode starts with the mother shouting at Kingstone to answer his phone without walking away. From her words and manner, the audience can infer what is going on even without seeing it - (Kingstone’s phone rings and he receives it, saying “Hello” as he walks away from the mother’s ear shot). The mother orders him back and tells him to talk in her hearing. She gives him a dressing down about poor phone etiquette and says that the reason he is going to talk from a distance is because he wants to gossip about her. The episode ends with an inference on the part of the audience that Kingstone has complied with the mother’s demands.

In both cases the parents are presented as overbearing and unreasonable while the children are docile and, in many cases, mute. One difference between *Flaqa 411* and *The Mama Njeri Show* is that in the former, the young person (Otis) talks (or at least attempts to talk) and we hear his responses to the parents’ diatribes, but Kingstone is usually outside of the frame and the audience never hears him talk, though can infer his words from the mother’s simulated dialogue. While the dramatized conflicts could be motivated by a variety of causes, one observes that a fundamental feature of the conflicts is the contest for power and control. I therefore examine the element of surveillance as an overarching strategy used by parents to exercise power over children. Several strategies of surveillance can be observed in the mundane domestic foibles that are dramatized in the skits.

Summoning of the youngsters by the parents especially the mother is a dominant characteristic. In both shows there are many instances when the parents call the youth mostly from their bedrooms and summon them to a common living space such as the lounge/living room. In a number of cases, there is nothing in particular that the youth are being summoned to do. This indicates a sort of deprivation of private space and private time. “Phone” presents a particular variant of summoning in which the young person is summoned even before he actually leaves. The episode begins with an up close shot of the mother as she talks to Kingstone. She begins with the words “hiyo ‘hello’ semea hapa/ Say that ‘hello’ from here” and follows closely with the question, “Ni wapi unaenda?/ Where are you going?” From these two lines of “dialogue”, the

audience immediately infers that the youngster is walking away from the presence of the mother in order to go and hold his phone conversation privately, but she summons him back. The mother demands that the young man stays within visibility and audibility, basic components of surveillance. The episode ends with a command by the mother, “rudi hapa!/come back here!”.

Calling the youth on their mobile phones is yet another form of summoning which sends the message that they are always under the monitoring “eye” or ear of the parent. Commenting on surveillance in media space, Kristin Ronzi (2014) points out that in *current times, the panopticon takes mainly the form of technology. She argues that people’s knowledge that they are being watched makes them modify behaviour even though not necessarily in positive or desirable ways. She gives the example of TV shows such The Big Brother Show and Quiet: We Live in Public* as an indication of the notion of surveillance both in public and private spaces. She views the panopticon as a metaphor for being observed by a larger entity such as God or government.

In the case of the online comedies under analysis, the watching/controlling larger entity is the parent. As we see in the two episodes, one key way of accomplishing this is controlling the use of the mobile phone. In the above example, the mother wants to monitor the son’s phone conversations and in “Timetable”, the parents want to control the son’s overall usage of the phone by imposing a timetable and eventually confiscating the phone. In the current age of information and technological development, the phone is not simply a device for communication, but a symbol of individuality and power. Both the parents and their children know that this gadget confers immense power especially to the youth, which then transforms it into an object of contestation. According to Foucault, the panopticon is built on a mechanism that allows the reduction of the number of those who exercise power while increasing the number of those on whom power is exercised (p.9). In controlling the use of the phone, the parents in “Timetable” and “Phone” not only manage to control and exercise power on their children, but also others whose communication with the children is curtailed.

Questioning is yet another invasive phase observed in the online comedies and it seems to naturally follow the summons. The youth could be questioned either directly or indirectly about any number of unrelated issues such as what s/he is doing, where s/he has been or who s/he was with. The questioning is almost always laced with sarcasm. In “Timetable”, Otis is asked a series of incisive and sarcastic questions, for example, “Kwa nini hufanyi kama Akoth?/ Why can’t you

behave like Akoth?”, “Kuna kitu ngumu kufuata kwa hii timetable?/ Is there anything difficult to follow in this timetable?” “Sasa tuongee kwa nguvu usikie?/ So we should now speak loudly so that you can hear?” Otis’ mother asks this particular question in response to Otis’ attempt to explain why he has overslept by making the plea that he is not feeling well. Otis says in Kiswahili, “sisikii vizuri” which literally translates to “I am not hearing well”. Of course, the mother knows he means “I am not feeling well”, but she sarcastically asks him whether they should talk more loudly so that he can hear. From the manner in which the questions are asked, it is clear that he is not expected to answer; the questions are simply meant as sarcastic jabs. At one point, Otis attempts to interject, but he is quickly shut down by the father with the words, “Kulizz! Have some respect for grown up conversation. Act oblivious of this conversation”.

In “Phone”, we observe a similar pattern with the mother asking many questions which she does not necessarily expect Kingstone to answer: “Ni wapi unaenda?/ Where is it that you are going?”, “Inakuabisha nini?/ Why does it (the phone call) embarrass you?” All these incisive questions point to the young person’s denial of privacy through the wielding of parental power. According to Foucault, one reason why the idea of the panopticon makes it possible to perfect the exercise of power is that it enables the person exercising power to intervene at any moment (p.9). In this episode, we see the mother’s panoptical gaze giving her the power to intervene in an instant to curtail the son’s freedom of receiving the phone call. The mother is aware that the phone conveys a sense of power and control and so if she cannot stop it from ringing, she does the next best thing which is to demand that Kingstone speaks in her hearing. By so doing, she is attempting to perform a kind of supervision over his use of the phone and more specifically monitor the conversation, a kind of inspection.

Inspecting is yet another level of surveillance that can be observed in the comedy shows. By virtue of being more mature and occupying a position of authority, parents usually assume the right to supervise their children. Phillippe Copeland, Ruth G. Dean & Stephanie P. Wladkowski examine supervision using insights from Michel Foucault and argue that supervision is an activity filled with ethical dilemmas related to the power held by the supervisor. They argue that supervision is often simply veiled inspection (p.27). In the online comedies under analysis, parents as institutions of power, exercise supervision in a manner that presents it as inspection. It takes various forms including walking around or looking around the children’s bedrooms and spying by eavesdropping. This brings to our focus the supervisory role played by parents as dramatized in the online comedies. In “Timetable” and “Phone” we see the parents supervising

the children in various spheres such as studies, time-management, use of the mobile phones among others. Parental supervision is exaggerated to the point of being caricatured, making the comedies a satirical portrayal of overbearing and power-wielding parents.

A simple tool like the study timetable designed by Otis' family operates within the frame of a powerful surveillance mechanism. According to the father who refers to himself as an intellectual professor, the contents of this piece of paper have the power to solve many problems and set the youngsters on the path to success. The diction he uses indicates the power he associates with following of the timetable. He reminds Otis that the whole family sat down and *designed* a study timetable which Otis is now *breaching*. The timetable can therefore be read as a panoptical tool through which "the gaze of the parent is alert everywhere" (Foucault, 1). This is reminiscent of a similar situation in the novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), by Chimamanda Adichie in which the two youngsters, Jaja and Kambili, who are visiting their auntie in a city far from their home, still feel the gaze of their father, Eugene, upon them because he has given them a timetable to follow while away from home. The timetable as a surveillance tool can be clearly understood by making reference to Foucault's argument that the concept of the panopticon makes it possible to perfect the exercise of power because its constant pressure acts even before offences, mistakes or crimes are committed (p.9). Due to the pressure exerted by the timetable, Akoth acts according to her parents' expectations without them having to remind her. On the other hand, Otis' behaviour can be read as a case of resistance against surveillance which, of course, has unpleasant repercussions, leading to a power contest, a matter to which I will pay attention next.

Subversion and Resistance in the Online Comedies

Foucault argues that the pervasive disciplinary power exercised by institutions of authority also ironically produces resistance because not all will subserviently subject themselves to this power manipulation. The analysis of the two online comedies seems to suggest that the texts under study can be read as an exercise in resistance against institutionalized power represented by overbearing parental authority. The resistance is staged mainly through dramatic strategies which will be considered next, noting also that these strategies make the skits appealing in their capacity as artistic performances.

Caricature of the parent figure is predominant in both shows and it is executed through various strategies such as exaggeration, stereotyping and eccentricity. In both shows, the parents are presented as eccentric figures and this is brought out in their manner of dress, their behaviour mannerisms and language among other elements. The two mothers, for example, always wear curios-looking headscarves and shawls, an aspect of costuming which is used to create a stereotypical figure of a provincial, uneducated mother. The father in *Flaqa Raz* is presented in the mold of an eccentric professor/ intellectual who dresses formally but in old-fashioned nearly worn out clothes.

Language and diction are also used for characterization and to create stereotypical figures. The two mothers speak in Kiswahili and occasionally in ungrammatical English, while the father speaks only in lofty and impeccable English. The father's lofty speech and intellectualism are used to create a character who is detached from the realities that his son is experiencing and this becomes an artistic dramatization of the gulf between the two by presenting the son in a perpetually misunderstood position. His father typically talks down to him without really listening. This is a caricature of the father who, despite his vast knowledge and grand ideas, is still very ignorant in matters relating to a real understanding of his son. This highlights a weakness of the center of power by exposing the ignorance and lack of empathy enshrined in the exercise of power, a kind of twist which gives the youth power despite their inferior position. This twist is emphasized further by the employment of reversal as will be demonstrated below.

Reversal of roles is apparent through the fact that the two comedy shows are created and acted by young people, who play the role of the parents (Brenda Jons plays the role of the nosy mother; Erastus Ayieko Otieno plays the role of the eccentric parents). In both cases a young artist mimics "old" parents, a reversal which gives young people the chance to hold a mirror to parents and show them how they look. Through art, the youth get a chance to dramatize the excesses of adults and parents in particular which means that the artistic medium gives them the power and platform to do what they cannot do in real life.

The young people may not get a chance to speak back to power either in real life or in their artistic role in the skits as children, but they still speak back through the meta-reality created through the comedy shows. Ultimately, what the creators of the comedies present to the audience is a grand picture of the exercise of power which amounts to a kind of resistance or subversion of

power because it holds it up for scrutiny. The exercise of scrutiny becomes more productive as a subversive device when one considers the play of irony.

Irony plays out in the apparent discrepancy between the position of power held by parents on the one hand and children on the other. Parents are portrayed as not only possessing power and authority, but also as extremely overbearing. The youth on the other hand are portrayed as humble, meek and in most cases “mute” because they hardly speak back to authority. At face value the texts seem to affirm parental totalitarianism, but the dramatization of power imbalance is an ironic device by the creators to indirectly draw the audience’s attention to this anomalous situation. Irony is emphasized through the use of *posturing* on the part of the children. As pointed out above, the children in these domestic dramas are mostly silent in the face of authority. The dialogue, conflict and plot of the dramas are presented in such a way that the unreasonable demands of the parents are set in bold relief.

In “Timetable”, Otis at one point tries to respond to the parents and is immediately shut down: “Otis lala na ujifanye hujui chenye kinaendelea hapa/ Otis sleep and make sure you don’t know what is going on here.” The young people know that the parents generally expect them to be silent and so they indulge them by being silent and appearing subservient. That the children are mostly quiet under the circumstances is a form of performing subservience; a kind of resistance by posturing reminiscent of Smith Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who always wears an expression of calm optimism whenever he is in front of the telescreen.

Some may argue that the portrayal of parents in the comedies is too harsh and gross in its boldness, but such a fear is mitigated by the fact that the grossness is couched in apparent flippancy and hilarity. This creates a kind of balance that enables the comedy shows to point out the excesses while at the same time presenting what is desirable in the institution of parenting. The comedy shows thrive on an ironic platform whereby they point out the extremes of parents, especially mothers, while at the same time, celebrating the sheer grit of mothers.

Conclusion

The analysis of the online comedies in the context of earlier performing art forms, reveals a trend of growing boldness in artistic expression in dealing with social issues especially in confronting power. Folktales criticize the folly and excesses of power in a manner that does not present

institutions of power such as parents as completely ludicrous. *Mchongoano* not only criticizes, but openly ridicules the failings of institutions of power including fathers, police, the rich among others. The online comedies, on other hand, not only openly ridicule excessive power, but also create artistic space for the youth to indirectly express themselves and challenge parental totalitarianism as an embodiment of power. A significant indication of the growing boldness in the online comedies is the direct focus on the mother figure as an object of comedy. This shift in the portrayal of the mother figure could hint at a change in the dynamics of relationships between parents and children, but this a matter that may require further inquiry. Related to the growing boldness, one also observes a shifting of power from adults to the youth. While in earlier forms such as folktales, the adult (usually the grandmother) was the “owner” of the tale, in later forms we see the youth owning the tale. *Mchongoano* for example is a youth genre in every sense. This shift of power is even more visible in the online comedies where the genre is not only owned by the youth but it directly targets parents as symbols of authoritarian power. This is enabled by the development in technology and the growing spaces availed by continued development of social media platforms and mobile applications which continue to create new avenues for artistic expression. The youth, being more adept at the uptake of technological innovations, are more likely to benefit from this expansion.

The analysis of the online comedies in the context of earlier forms of artistic performances brings us to the conclusion that irony is a key strategy of subversion and resistance. Since irony creates meaning by exploiting the discrepancy between appearance and reality, it renders itself easily as an insidious tool of subversive posturing. Parents use irony as well, but in a different way; they mostly employ verbal irony through sarcastic language with the aim of jabbing and jolting the youth into conforming to parental and social requirements. The youth, on the other hand, use a higher irony through mannerism such as silence, expressionless faces and apparent subservience. One could argue further that the power relations dramatized in these comedies could be used as a lens to read other power relationships in society including teachers vis-a-vis students or even government authorities vis-a-vis the citizenry.

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Appendix i

Flaqo Ras/ Flaqo 411

Episode: Timetable

- ...
- Mother: (“Late” morning. Mother goes into Otis’ bedroom and finds him asleep. She sits on a stool).
- Father: (Enters Otis’ bedroom and sits on a stool). He is breaching the routine we all agreed upon.
- Mother: (whispering). He does not listen; you see!
Akoth woke up and washed the dishes but (Otis wakes up. Mother suddenly raises her voice to shouting level) BUT THE EYEWITNESSSS, THE EYEWITNESSS...
- Father: Kijana (Boy) just go back to sleep.
- Mother: Pretend that we are not here. Don’t even peek.
- Father: We put a routine we all agreed upon...
- Mother: They use their phones while they are studying and when I enter the study room, they hide them.
- Otis: (protesting)Eey Mum!
- Father: Kulizz! Have some respect for grown up conversation. Act oblivious of this conversation.
- Mother: Otis sleep! And make sure you don’t know what is going on here. (Otis covers his head). ...
- Father: Ee? During study time they are using phones?! (Otis looks at his father in shock). Boy close your eyes and enjoy sleep. (He covers his head).
- ...
- Father: Boy wake up and sit up!
- Mother: (shouting)WAKE UP AND SIT UP! (he sits up quickly).
- Father: It is quarantine time; school is closed; learning not in progress. We all sat down together with your sister and mother and designed a study timetable.
- Mother: Why can’t you behave like Akoth?
- Otis: Mum sisikii vizuri (I am not feeling well)
- Mother: So we should now speak loudly so that you can hear? (*joke lost in translation)
- Otis: No, not like that. My health is what is not good.
-
- Mother: His work is to sit with his phone saying “WELCOME TO YOU TUBE CHANNEL” and his brain has left him. It’s in reverse. ...
- Father: Your work is just internet alone.... My son, you boy...
Boy, following a routine worked for me into becoming an intellectual professor. (with a sense of pride) Surprise!
- Mother: Is there really something hard to follow in this time table?
- Otis: No...
- Father: Follow in the footsteps of your sister...
- Mother: Bring your phone here.
- Father: Yes
- Mother: BRING IT!

Appendix ii

The Mama Njeri Show *Episode: Phone*

Mother: (*miming holding a phone to the ear and bending over. Addressing Kingstone*) Say that “Hallo” from here!

Where is it that you are going? (*dramatizing*)Receiving your phone call bent over like a sheep? (*mimicking*) “Hallo. Hallo”.

Hallo what? Say that “Hallo” from here.

Those are the phone calls you take in your bedrooms gossiping about me. Saying that your mother is a fool. Saying “Ooh my Mum nags and disturbs so much”

[*Joke lost in translation]

Saying things like “Ohh my Mum is such a nag and a dummy” in my hearing!

You have all lost respect for me in this house.

It’s like no one can take a phone call in front of me.

Do you see me taking my phone calls from the bedroom and saying “Hallo Hallo” (*says this with her head bent and shoulders hunched*).

That “Hallo” should be said here!

Why does it embarrass you?

If that person wants to speak to you let them come and visit. Let them come we see them.

What is?! You’ll just be on your phones saying (*imitating a foreign accent*) “Ooh yesterday”

Yesterday what?!

Don’t tell me! Mum what?! I don’t want to hear that!

Phone calls should be taken from here... You just sit in the sitting room... Where are you going? (*Shouting*)COME BACK HERE!

