

The Tyranny of Televised Comedy: Modeling Ethnic Relation through ‘Churchill Live Show’ in Kenya

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Abstract: Ethnic jokes from televised shows are supposedly major determinants of ethnic relation. This is established in the current study that examined the implications of televised ethnic comedy from ‘Churchill Live Show’ on ethnic relations in Kenya. This paper is obtained from the study and presents representation of four major ethnic groups [Kikuyu, Luo, Kalenjin and the Kamba] out of the nine groups studied. The audiences engaged in the study were for the opinion that ‘Churchill Live Show’ jokes are the most popular among the Kenyan population, and the audiences confessed that they love the show because of its comical nature. The study found that people believe in ethnic characterisations and use them to treat the outer groups as depicted. It is established that the audience believed the depictions of outer groups and described the characterisation of in-group as inaccurate. The study also found out that many people get ethnic characterisations from Churchill live show and believe in the representations of ethnic groups. It was therefore, evident that ‘Churchill Live Show’ acts as a source of ethnic stereotypes in Kenya; and Kenyans use such stereotypes to relate ethnically with members of other ethnic groups. The researcher recommends that the audience be made aware that ethnic jokes are meant for comical purposes and are not to be taken seriously. The media and other stakeholders should be active in this awareness to minimise stereotyping and ethnic relation that could contribute to negative ethnicity in Kenya.

Keywords: Ethnic jokes; televised shows; Churchill Live Show; awareness

INTRODUCTION TO ‘CHURCHILL LIVE SHOW’

The recent growth of stand-up televised comedy in the entertainment industry in Kenya has come with extensive reliance on ethnic jokes; and Churchill live show is one such comedy show with a force that requires academic attention in the media. Churchill Live Show is the leading televised stand-up comedy show; aired on Nation TV (NTV); one of the leading private TV channels in Kenya. The comedy show has two segments. The *Churchill Show* is the main segment and is aired on Sundays between 8 pm and 9 pm. The *Churchill Raw* is the second segment aired on Thursdays between 8.30 pm and 9 pm on NTV. ‘Churchill Live Show’ has received acclaim and numerous awards as the best of comic shows in Kenya, East and Central Africa. The show has also gained momentous international interest from comedy enthusiasts in the US, the UK, India, Germany, and the rest of the world. The televised comedy show has been highly successful and has been seen as a groundbreaker in the Kenyan comedy and entertainment industry [1]. According to the *Intermedia* survey on most watched TV programmes in Kenya, approximately five to seven million Kenyans watch ‘Churchill Live Show’ [2]. The ‘Churchill Live Show’ is a significant player in the

entertainment industry in Kenya. As an entertainment show, its content plays the role of shaping perceptions. ter Wal [3] argues that “entertainment is an important tool for shaping perceptions of the world in a playful way and can encourage social integration, especially when minorities are actively involved” (p. 82). However, ‘Churchill Live Show’ utilises ethnic humour whose impact is quite unclear given that ethnic humour is sourced from stereotypes. The humour is consumed with laughter, the show has gained prominence, and growth, but the implications of the show on the ethnic relations in Kenya was unclear. The current study found that the ethnic jokes from the ‘Churchill Live Show’ shape ethnic relations among the audience in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

The study was premised on a case study design, one of the qualitative approaches of descriptive research. The primary data was obtained from focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews with ‘Churchill Live Show’ audience from Nakuru municipality. The researcher targeted 30 participants, constituting people from 9 ethnic groups frequently stereotyped in ‘Churchill Live Show’ [although in this paper only data for four ethnic groups is presented]. The responses from FGDs and in-depth interviews were

analysed for representation within and outside the depicted groups in the jokes. The stages of analysis involved data grouping and information labeling, analysis for meaning through theory and establishing the meanings and emerging themes.

FINDINGS: ETHNIC REPRESENTATIONS IN THE JOKES

1. The Avaricious Kikuyu

The Kikuyu form the largest ethnic group in population in Kenya. The members of Kikuyu community are highly vulnerable in ethnic jokes because almost every Kenyan has a contact with them. The ethnic group dominate central province, where their myth of origin traces their first parents. The transcript 1 joke shows Kikuyu as an avaricious ethnic group:

Transcript 1

Jesus was crucified alongside two thieves. If that happened in Kiambu, Central and the thieves happened to be Kinuthia and Njoroge Muturi *hatungepata ukombozi* (we would not have received salvation). Their conversation would have been like this:

Kinuthia: *wee, ukienda mbinguni usinisahau* (You, remember me when you are in heaven)

Njoroge Muturi: *tuachane na maneno ya mbinguni, tumalizane hapa hapa. Wee yesu unajua tumelalia pesa, hii msalaba ni hardwood. Si wewe uko na nguvu, vuta customer.* (Let us forget about heavenly things as for now, let us sort issues here on Earth. You Jesus, do you know we are leaning on money; this cross is made of hardwood. Since you have powers, attract customers)

Most jokes on the kikuyu people base their punch lines on the widely known depiction of them as fierce business people. The jokes are sourcing their punch lines from the stereotype that members of Kikuyu community are avaricious, creative and opportunistic businesspersons, but also exploring their tendency to exploit any opportunity to make money. That even in danger of death, a Kikuyu man is thinking about money.

On the question of their general perception on the way the Kikuyu are represented in Churchill live comedy, the participants in the focused group discussion felt that members of Kikuyu ethnicity are truly avaricious (*Watu wanaopenda pesa na biashara kupindukia*). The participants, however, agreed that all people love money and no one hates being successful. Many participants were for the view that the Kikuyu are aggressive in business and they succeed in business because of their culture of risking in investing. As to whether members of Kikuyu ethnicity are inherently thieves as depicted, the participants' opinion was divided. A group argued that they are thieves but others argued that thievery is a behavior of certain individuals

noting that stealing happens all over the world and that the Kikuyu are not involved everywhere. Participants accused the televised comedy for generalising the character of the Kikuyu and felt that much of this belief is immortalised by the jokes.

Participants from other ethnic groups felt that these depictions are believable and in most cases, relate with some ethnic groups based on these representations. One participant said that he has been made to believe that the Kikuyu are thieves and avaricious because this has been repeated many times in the jokes. *Ingekuwa ni uongo si wangepinga* (if it were a misrepresentation, they could have come out to contest it)

2. The proud and the conspicuous consumer in Luo

The Luo dominates the region popularly known as the Luo Nyanza in Western part of Kenya. From independence, the Luo community has engaged in a tough criticism with the ruling regimes, and especially the Kikuyu [4]. Therefore, the community is popular all over the country. Members of the Luo community are not spared in the jokes used in Churchill live show. People from this ethnic group are said to engage in conspicuous consumption, live like kings and associate themselves with the most expensive living, technology and popularly expensive lifestyles, in addition to public display of pride. The associations have given the Luo an upper hand as the members pride that Luo is not an ethnic group but a lifestyle. Members of other ethnic groups refer to the Luo lifestyle as a 'killer pride' and they say, *Ujaluo utakuuwa* (the Luo lifestyle will kill you). *Ujaluo* (Luoism) in the context of a Kenyan is synonymous to pride. On their pride and conspicuous consumption, one comedian posed the joke in transcript 2:

Transcript 2

Do you know it is only in Luo Nyanza where a person can tell you the difference between the car you ignite and the car you start?

In another joke, a comedian demonstrates how expensive it is to belong to Luo ethnicity, drawing a motif from the biblical creation story:

Transcript 3

Ujaluo ni gharama. If Adam was a Luo, angeuliza Mungu: God yawa, even if you are the creator, should you create me using soil? (To be a Luo is costly. If Adam was a Luo, he could have bothered God. 'Even if you are the creator, should you create me using soil?')

In the above joke, the implication is that the soil is a cheap matter to be used to create a supposedly 'high valued' member of the Luo ethnic group. To them, it would be unfair to create them out of such cheap, available and demeaning raw material.

Moreover, the members of Luo community are associated with pleasure-seeking tendencies. As a result, the comedians represent them as people who live for today and do not care about tomorrow. For example, they can buy a car for public display and neglect their rural homes. In African setting rural homes are extremely significant for rural development and cultural bondage. A responsible man is valued when he works at the urban and develops and connects with those at the rural area from where he grew up. Members of the Luo community are believed to stay in urban centre and enjoy high standard of living while neglecting their rural areas. To illustrate this case, transcript 4 joke from one comedian has contrasting symbolism:

Transcript 4

Ukienda Luo Nyanza utashangaa kukuta Range Rover karibu na nyumba ya nyasi. Ukiuliza mwenyewe anakwambia ile nyumba ya nyasi ni kitchen; bedroom ni kwa Range Rover. (If you go to Luo Nyanza, you will be surprised to find a Range Rover outside a Shanty and if you ask the owner; he would tell you that the shanty is the kitchen and the range rover the bedroom)

Asked to comment on the way the Luo are depicted, the FGD participants contended that the Luo are done justice. The participants felt that sometimes, the Luo are represented in both positive light and negative light. The moderator probed further to know whether the representations of the Luo are accurate. The participants were excited on this and most felt that the representations such as the Luo being conspicuous consumers and proud classy people are true.

The Luo in the FGDs agreed that they are proud. That they are brought up to be so, but the comedians exaggerate this. For example, upon probing, they posited that they do not own Mercedes while sleeping in shanties. That they also own phones, which are low class and that although they like big things as their culture, that is only attainable by a few working-class who can afford it. The Luo agreed that in most cases, they are treated as being proud. That people listen and laugh at them when they talk because their discourse explicit power. *Mjaluo akiongea anaongea bila woga hatunjuagi* (When a Luo speaks, our voice has power but we do not deliberately do it). Another Luo felt that sometimes some depictions are far too much. For example, he cited a friend who was forced by his bride on the wedding day to swear that he will build her a house in their locality if she married her.

3. The Racing Kalenjin

The Kalenjin is a Nilotic ethnic group inhabiting the Rift Valley Province in Kenya. Their present-day homeland is Kenya's Western highlands and the Rift Valley. They are nationally and

internationally renowned for their athletic prowess and they have won the description of Kenya's running tribe [5]. The Kalenjin have also had their share of popularity given that one of them, Daniel Arap Moi ruled as the second president of Kenya for over two decades. However, the aspect that has given them an upper hand is their dexterity in athletics than all the other ethnic groups in Kenya combined. In most jokes, the Kalenjin are associated with long distance race and hence; as people who do not fear long distances. In one of the jokes (transcript 5) that characterise their nature of athletics and long distance race champions, a comedian asked kids in the show:

Transcript 5

Uhuru na Ruto wakikimbia, ni nani atashinda? (If Uhuru and Ruto were on a race, who would win?) One child answered "Ruto". Asked the reason behind her answer she said "*Kwa sababu Ruto ni Mkalenjin*" (Because Ruto is a Kalenjin)

Uhuru Kenyatta (a Kikuyu) is the fourth president of the republic of Kenya and Ruto (a Kalenjin) is his deputy president. In this case, it is clear that even children are already aware of the characteristics associated with the Kalenjin people with regard to athletics. There are many jokes that have defined the characteristics of the Kalenjin in this way: one comedian posed in Churchill show the joke in transcript 6 below:

Transcript 6

In Eldoret, the best way to be romantic is to tell your girlfriend to join you in training

Another joke acted by the rib crackers group in Churchill raw derived from the value that Kalenjin give to the Olympic Games and compares this to their families and other possessions. In Eldoret, the police catch an armed thief and order him to put the gun down and surrender under some conditions.

Transcript 7

Police: *Chepkemos, weka bunduki chini!* (Chepkemos put your gun down!)

Chepkemos does nothing...

Police: *Kumbuka mashamba yako!* (Remember your land and surrender your gun!)

Chepkemos does not surrender...

Police: *Kumbuka familia yako* (remember your family and surrender!)

Chepkemos does not respond...

Police: *Kumbuka Olympics inakunja!* (Ok, remember the forthcoming Olympic games!)

Chepkemos puts the gun down and surrenders quickly.

To the comedian, and the punch line of the joke, the Kalenjin value athletics more than their families and other possessions. On the way the Kalenjin

are depicted, the participants felt that they are portrayed positively. However, they are neutral as to whether some representations are positive, especially when in the jokes, the Kalenjin are depicted as people who always think, act, walk, decide and live on athletics. As to whether the depictions are accurate, participants in all FGDs shared the view that the representation is accurate. They cited that majority of athletes are Kalenjin. They however, were not sure that the Kalenjin do not require cars to travel or they value gold medal and their legs more than other parts of the body. Members of other ethnic groups felt that the Kalenjin are treated as achievers and people who have done proud to this country. One Kalenjin, though, said at one time, he was fired as a home guard by a Kikuyu businessman and dismissed him saying, *Nyinyi wakale hamjui kazi; kile mnajua ni mbio tu* (you Kalenjins cannot work, what you can do is only racing.)

4. The witchcraft that is Kamba

The Kamba community in Kenya forms a large ethnic group that dominates the semi-arid formerly Eastern Province of Kenya stretching east from Nairobi to Tsavo and north up to Embu County [6]. This region is popularly known as *Ukambani* constituting Machakos, Kitui, and Makueni Counties. This community has been associated with some unique characteristics and a culture of witchcraft and magic powers derived from their powerful charms. They have also been associated with sexual virility as their men were considered sex maniacs in post independence narratives [7]. The ethnic jokes on Kamba come coded in symbolism and style. One comedian from 'Churchill Live Show' explored the common believes that Kamba women are highly protected by their husbands using charms to keep off other men and if she has cuckolded him, the other man mysteriously sticks in the act until they are found:

Transcript 8

Ukienda kwa night club, kwanza uliza mrembo utakayepata jina lake? Akisema Nduku ama Mwende mwambie acha nifike hapa kindogo halafu toweka. Kwa sababu akiwa ni bibi wa mtu, tutakusoma kwa magazeti. (When you go to a nightclub, ask the woman you will happen to dance with her name. If she says Nduku or Mwende, request her to excuse you and then disappear because if she is someone else's wife, we will read you in newspapers).

This joke sounds incomplete, but it is ready for cracking from the disclosure of the names of the woman. Nduku and Mwende are common Kamba names. The Kenyan audience will find humour in it because they are aware that the comedian was talking about the Kamba in association with witchcraft. These names are commonly used in comedy to describe women from Kamba community. In most cases, ethnic jokes are hinted and since the listeners have already

inculcated the stereotypes, they decode the intended message and laugh. The power of comedy, as the power of any literary discourse, lies in decoding and realising that you have been told what you already knew but you realised late; it is as if you have been tricked and caught unaware.

Another joke associating the Kamba with witchcraft comes as a comparative analysis between the popular Nigerian *Juju* and the Kamba's *Kamuti*. One stand up comedian, who represents the ethnic group and jokes about them posed:

Transcript 9

Ukambani hatuogopi manaigerians, juju inakuja namba two, kamuti namba one. Ni wapi ulishawahi ona maji yakipanda mlima wewe kama machakos? (In Kamba land, we do not fear Nigerians. Their charm (referred to as Juju) comes number two, our charm (referred to as Kamuti) comes number one. Where else have you ever seen water going uphill like Machakos?)

Machakos is the centre and hometown of the Kamba people. *Kamuti* is a charm in Kamba and is believed to have magical powers that can be used by people to achieve their desired purposes. Likewise, *juju* is a Nigerian charm popularised by Nigerian's literature and films and serves the same purpose of applying magical powers for desired purposes. In Machakos, there is a place called Kituluni hills (The Anti-Gravity Hill), 12 kilometers east of Machakos town, and 60 kilometers east of Nairobi where water goes up the hill due to some forces of gravity that has never been proven elsewhere. The comedian associates this against-the-gravity movement of water to the powers of Kamba's charm.

It was interesting to establish how these depicted characteristics influence the way people from this ethnic group are treated and viewed by members of other ethnic groups, and the implications of such relations. During the focused group discussions and interviews, the way Kamba people take these characterisations and whether other ethnic groups believe in the characterizations was established. The moderator probed to get the view of participants regarding the way the Kamba are depicted. The participants contended that the Kamba are portrayed negatively. Some participants felt that some of the representations of the Kamba work to their advantage. The participants posited that the Kamba are known for witchcraft. One participant said he comes from a place where witchcraft is highly regarded, but she was not a Kamba. The participant said she heard about the Kamba and their strong witchcraft of making people eat grass or catching adulterers using charms from the media. Upon hearing it severally in the Churchill show, the

participants said I somehow believe it could be accurate and I would treat the Kamba with caution.

The Kamba in the discussion reported that there is witchcraft in *Ukambani*. They also agreed that their place is dry but they contended that not all Kamba people practice witchcraft. One of the participant said “*wengine tumeokoka na hatufanyi kazi na urogi*” (some of us are saved and do not work with charms). The Kamba were quick to say that in most cases they are intimidated and angered when members of other ethnic groups treat them as people who depend on charms to survive. One member narrated a case where she was requested by her neighbour to take her to *Ukambani* to fetch a charm that would protect her neighbor’s husband. When she refused, the neighbour started accusing her of planning to snatch her husband and using a charm to lure him.

Participants from other ethnic groups contended that they believe in the depictions about the Kamba people and that there is no way they can prove it otherwise. One of them said *siwezi tembea na bibi wa mkamba hata ikiwa sina strings attached* (I cannot dare walk with a Kamba wife even when there are no strings attached). Another said I avoid eating from a kiosk ya *wakamba kwa sababu wataniwekea kamuti* (cannot eat from Kamba food outlet because he fears they can charm him).

DISCUSSION: TELEVISED JOKES AND AUDIENCE RELATIONS

The literature review established some standing arguments that the society pretends that ethnic comedy is not harmful to them [8], but in real sense, ethnic comedy works on peoples subconscious through accumulation and harbors in their id [9]. Studies that are more recent call for a deeper search into the implications of living with stereotypes inculcated by the televised comedy shows [10]. The audiences in this study expressed their observation that some ethnic groups portrayed positively like the depictions, are proud of them, and use the depictions to exclude other groups that are not favoured by the depictions. The audience was for the opinion that at least every ethnic joke has some element of truth regarding a group, but in most cases, the generalization of ethnic group characteristics is misleading and results to ethnic stereotyping, whether positive or negative.

Although ethnic jokes make the audience laugh, scholars have established that they inculcate ethnic stereotypes whose impact goes beyond the laughter [11-13]. The stereotyping and accumulation theories agree that in mediated comedy the audience members accumulatively inculcate meanings into their memories as relatively inflexible schemata [14]. These schemata are actually the stereotyping interpretations that people use when dealing, thinking about or responding to individuals of a portrayed category

without regard to their actual personal characteristics. For example, one participant in the study expressed that ‘guards can only be Luhyas because you know what will happen if it were a Kikuyu’. The rest of the audience laughed, including me because we all knew what he meant. This was a perfect example of how rigid the portrayals have gotten into our minds and it shapes the way we respond to issues and individuals in the society. Descriptive jokes such as keep your hands on your pockets when dancing with a Kikuyu woman — meaning she can steal from you anytime or you do not need a packing to host a Kalenjin cultural night are a result of these meanings.

In the current study, the audience confessed that they use the characterizations found in ethnic jokes to determine the way they relate with an ethnic group. For example, some respondents appreciated the fact that jokes inform them about some ethnic groups so that they are armed when relating with them. The interviews with individual members of ethnic groups portrayed in the jokes cited cases where they were treated as portrayed in the jokes. The kikuyu said they are often suspected as thieves, the Kamba reported being treated with suspicion or overtly believed to possess charms and Luhyas cited being treated as guards.

The study revelations challenges the assumption that the possible negative effect of stereotyping in comedy and entertainment industry is not scientifically proven since no study has proved such [12]. The existence of a social phenomenon cannot hold to be true only when it has been studied and proven. In this study, the audience undeniably agreed that they use the characterisations to include and exclude others in their social, political, religious, economic and cultural engagements. This does not mean that the effect has not been there. Inclusion and exclusion for whatever purpose is a harmful social phenomenon and therefore negative in whatever form even when not scientifically proven. Moreover, the audience and specifically as expressed in the interviews, were for the view that comedians are not doing enough to bring out the positive aspects of some ethnic groups. Every ethnic group has a positive aspect that can be highlighted alongside the negative aspects. This shockingly agrees with a position that comedians use stereotypes to reduce effort involved in thinking about something given that stereotyping is a simplified mental picture of an individual or group of people who share certain stereotypical qualities [8].

Most scholars [15-17, 10] agree that ethnic stereotyping, as that from ‘Churchill Live Show’ dwells on distorted images of people; and that the distorted image is mostly misguided. The study participants expressed their view that there is no single behavioral pattern, which is a preserve of a community. Most respondents in the interviews reported that the characteristics supposedly associated solely with their

ethnic group are found in all societies. For example, the Kikuyu members said thievery is a social evil found in all societies in the world and all ethnic groups in Kenya.

The audience also expressed their opinion that even when a comedian from a group becomes an actor in its positive or negative characterisation, this does not make the depictions less or more accurate. This finding challenges Bowes [18] position that ethnic comedy is acceptable as far as the portrayals are made when it is clear that the group being stereotyped will be laughing alongside others. Bowes [18] argument is less accurate because in communication, what is more important is not the conveyor of the message, but the content of the message.

There was a revelation also that all of the audience confessed they get the most televised ethnic stereotypes regarding other ethnic groups from Churchill live Show. It was established that members of an in-group contend that their group is depicted inaccurately but believe that depictions of other groups are accurate. As much as accuracy of the representations is not established, the relation among the groups will remain problematic. For example, the most malicious relation among ethnic groups is consciously or unconsciously anchored on stereotypes about the groups.

In the analyses of Kan [12] Leda and Mark [17], those involved in the production of comedy shows defend that stereotypes can be used to reflect deeper injustices in the society. This depends on the way the audience interpret the jokes. For example, there has been a general feeling that there is injustice on the side of the Somali in Kenya when they are treated as terrorists by the security forces. However, the audience does not take the depiction of Somali as terrorists from that hidden symbolic interpretation. The society members are not privy to interpretation perspectives and indirect revelations. It was clear from the study that even though ethnic jokes dissolves the tension that exists regarding a group, they formalize the perceived characteristics of a group and this accumulates over a time to be accepted as true hence becoming a stereotype which groups use for inclusion and or exclusion purposes.

The audience revealed that they are aware 'Churchill Live Show' did not start ethnic stereotyping, but it recreates them and brings them in a new, hilarious form that appears innocent but when closely investigated, it could be disastrous on the ethnic relation in Kenya. This is in agreement with Kroeger's [10] contention that television is a major influence in instilling cultures that have far-reaching implications. This process works through accumulation theory of mass media. As the current study found, the minimal impacts of ethnic jokes slowly add up over time and

produce significant influence on the audiences' ethnic relation.

CONCLUSION

After analysing the representation of ethnic groups in 'Churchill Live Show' it is established that 'Churchill Live Show' utilizes ethnic jokes targeting some ethnic groups and representing them in either positive or negative light. Comedians in Churchill live uses ethnic groups' specific aspects such as geographical location, cultural believes and practices, religious affiliations or economic status and activities to derive their punch lines for jokes. Most ethnic groups in Kenya (the Kikuyu, the Kamba, the Swahili, the Meru, the Kisii, and the Luhya) are given negative characterisations in Churchill live jokes and they do not find it accurate. Some ethnic groups such as the Kalenjin are represented positively and covertly in a negative way, while the Luo are portrayed overtly in a negative way and covertly in a positive light.

The audiences' responses on representation of ethnic groups in 'Churchill Live Show' jokes revealed that Kenyans are aware of ethnic jokes from Churchill live show, and they take them seriously and as accurate representation of groups provided those groups is not their in-group. Although members from their groups who act as comedians negatively depict some ethnic groups, the treatment of the group and interpretation remains the same. Those ethnic groups portrayed in negative light do not like the portrayals; but those given positive attributes are proud of the representations.

The ethnic stereotypes from 'Churchill Live Show' shape audiences relation in different ways. The audience confirmed they use the ethnic portrayals in the jokes to determine the way they relate with other ethnic groups. It was clear that economic, cultural and social relation among ethnic groups is based on ethnic stereotypes inculcated partly by the televised comedy. The fact that the ethnic labels are aired on television and the television show has been consistent, the show has played a role in entrenching ethnic stereotypes and therefore significantly contributed in the way ethnic groups relate in Kenya.

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