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Mocking the state: comic strips in the Zimbabwean press

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In the last decade, the concept of the everyday has come to feature prominently within the arts and humanities, and particularly also in the fields of media and cultural studies (Silverstone 1994; Scannell 1996; Mackay 1997; Gauntlett and Hill 1999; Storey 1999; Moores 2000). The consolidation of this theoretical framework can also be highlighted with the recent publication of an everyday theory textbook and reader (Highmore 2001; Highmore 2002). The emphasis in most of the work done within media and cultural studies has been on the role of media in people's everyday lives, e.g. how new communication technologies change relationships between people, the manner in which media make available types of identity to audiences, and the way in which media structure everyday routines.

This paper turns the relation between the everyday and the media around, and will instead look at how notions of "everydayness" and "ordinariness" have been constructed in the media, and particularly in comic strips in Zimbabwe. I attribute a key role to popular culture in this regard, as that is where "issues central to the everyday life of the majority of population are being articulated and debated, and new modes of life are made visible, audible, thinkable" (Folke Frederiksen 1997: 94).

The comic strip Chikwama which appeared in the Zimbabwean private newspaper *The Daily News* provided a powerful but subtle commentary on the changing everyday lives that came with the increasing economic, political and social crisis. Whereas mainstream media reports highlighted the passivity of Zimbabweans in the face of increasing repression, this paper will argue that comic strips provided a different and more diffuse conceptualisation of power and subjectivity. Chikwama showed the more ambiguous ways in which Zimbabweans negotiated changes in their everyday lives.

Representing the rulers and the ruled

In an article entitled "Dictator's grip is tightened by weak protest" in the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, journalist David Blair (2005) suggests that the 'docile nature' of Zimbabweans has enabled President Mugabe to strengthen his rule:

In fairness, there has been little spontaneous discontent. A few stones were thrown at police during the urban demolitions and street battles briefly erupted in towns such as Chitungwiza. But many Zimbabweans meekly submitted to the destruction of their homes and livelihoods.

Any outsider with goodwill towards this beautiful country is led towards some profoundly disturbing conclusions. The entire Zimbabwean nation seems to have given up opposing Mr Mugabe. Put bluntly, they are waiting for God to remove him. The MDC's [main opposition party Movement for Democratic Change - WW] failure to offer any protest or resistance reflects the popular mood.

But if 12 million Zimbabweans have no will to rid themselves of a dictator, why should anyone else help? Perhaps Zimbabweans deserve the most damning verdict of all - that they have the leader they deserve.

I hasten to add that I do not believe this. But looking at the country's recent history, I find it hard to listen to Zimbabweans who blame the outside world for failing to help. They have done precious little to help themselves and Mr Tsvangirai [*MDC president - WW*] seems most adept at machine-gunning himself in both feet.

In other words, Zimbabweans had themselves to blame for the deteriorating situation in their country. Put bluntly, because of their passivity, they got the regime they deserved. Or as Richard Dowden (2005), the previous Africa Editor of *The Economist*, wrote in an article in *The Times*, "The opposition Movement for Democratic Change has missed its chance to follow the example of the citizens of Ukraine, Georgia and Madagascar and take to the streets to force out a tyrannical ruler". Especially, in the run-up to the Presidential Elections in April 2005, the comparison with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine was often made. The international media was waiting for Zimbabweans to rise up and stand against the Mugabe regime, just like people had done in Ukraine, Georgia and Madagascar. When it did not happen, they were disappointed and interest in Zimbabwe soared.

Apart from media representations of Zimbabweans as passive subjects to an all-powerful government, there has been a similar discourse on the influence of the media, and particularly government media. This discourse of what I would call 'passive audiences' is expressed for example in a public opinion survey part of a series known as Afrobarometer. The survey concluded that the government media in Zimbabwe have been successful in their efforts to win the hearts and minds of Zimbabweans (Chikwanha, Sithole and Bratton 2004; Bratton, Chikwana and Sithole 2005). Afrobarometer measures "the social, political and economic atmosphere in Africa".¹ The project compares "trends in public attitudes" in various African countries and shares results with "decision makers, policy advocates, civic educators, journalists, researchers, donors and investors, as well as *average Africans who wish to become more informed and active citizens*" [emphasis added by author].² The researchers of the Zimbabwean survey were confronted with an outcome that they could not quite explain. Although Zimbabweans seemed to blame the government for the deteriorating economic conditions, the results of the survey concluded that many Zimbabweans still respected and supported President Mugabe.

The research team attempted to explain this 'paradox' through three factors: economic patronage, political fear and persuasion by the mass media. They did not find a significant relation between the first two factors and continued support to the government but did find a statistical significant relation between factor three and a positive evaluation of the government. Because readers attached a significant amount of trust in the government media, they concluded that this confidence must have motivated and convinced readers to continue to support the ruling regime. The research team here implies a straightforward, causal relation or 'hypodermic needle effect' between trust in the media and support for the regime. This relation could be turned around as well. Would readers who are inclined to support the regime at all costs not also support the type of media in which their leaders are portrayed in a favourable way? In other words, could people's support not precede their preference for certain media?

¹ See the Afrobarometer website: <http://www.afrobarometer.org/>

² Ibid.

The research team argued the other way to enable them to give their final report a catchy title “The power of propaganda” or as David Moore (2005) cynically noted in a response to the report “we can guarantee continued donor funding for the science of surveying democratic progress across the Dark Continent”. Both the Bratton research team and Blair and Dowden expect a particular kind of resistance that Zimbabweans apparently have not demonstrated. However, these accounts have ignored both the repressive nature of the state and the different, perhaps less visible ways in which Zimbabweans have responded to their regime in their everyday lives.

In a climate where efforts are being made to stifle flows of information, I will argue, other forms of media gain importance. With reference of Africa, Ellis (1989: 321) has noted the central role of what has become known as ‘radio trottoir’ in Francophone Africa or ‘pavement radio’ in Anglophone Africa, which he defines as “the popular and unofficial discussion of current affairs in Africa, particularly in town”. Bourgault (1995: 201) identifies ‘parallel discourse’ as a means through which Africans have managed to “deform, through deconstruction and reconstruction, the praises they are forced to sing and perform”. She refers hereby to the work of Comi Toulabor (1986) who has written on how official party slogans and songs are subverted by people during official visits of government officials. Mbembe (2001: 106), drawing on De Certeau (1984), speaks of ‘poaching of meanings’ by Togolese who identified the Togolese party acronym RPT with “the sound of faecal matter dropping into a septic tank” or “the sound of a fart emitted by quivering buttocks which can only smell disgusting”.

In the numerous queues that rapidly appeared and have grown in length in the past five years, Zimbabweans have been actively debating politics irrespective of their fears. In commuter omnibuses, people have been sharing jokes mocking the regime although not always without consequences. Naming and re-naming has been a powerful strategy that has long been used in Zimbabwe in order to comment upon political affairs. For example the acronym ESAP which stood for the ‘Economic Structural Adjustment Programme’ in the early 1990s came to be known as ‘Even Sadza is a Problem’, to denote the rising prices of food after the abolishment of food subsidies as a result of the implementation of neoliberal policies.³ The recent attempts by the Zimbabwean government to ‘clean up’ the urban areas in ‘Operation Murambatsvina’ [Operation Drive Out Trash in Shona] came to be known as ‘Tsunami’ or Zimbabwe’s ‘Hurricane Katrina’.

In order to understand how Zimbabweans relate to their rulers and have positioned themselves, it is probably more useful to look at these various ways of public speech and commentary instead of conducting surveys on public opinion and attitudes in a climate where fear and intimidation is rife. Comic strips have been important forms of commentary and I would agree with Francis Nyamnjoh (2005: 84) that “it is necessary to look beyond meta-narratives of euphoria and victimhood to understand how marginalised individuals and communities are responding to state repression [...]”.

In an important article on popular culture in Africa, Johannes Fabian (1997: 25) argues that “cultural expressions ... are not evidence for how culture ‘works’ (or ‘functions’ or ‘determines action’); but they demonstrate how perceptions, experiences and problems are being ‘worked out’ in an open, never-ending process”. According to Fabian, cultural expressions should not be seen as ‘reflections’ of an already-constituted ‘world view’. Rather, they are part of the work of cultural production. In a similar way, Mbembe (2001: 142) describes the cartoon as ‘a figure of speech’ that is “never an exact copy of reality” but “always a conventional comment, the transcription of reality, a word, a vision”. In this paper, I would like to show how a

³ Sadza is a porridge made out of white maize flour which is Zimbabwe’s staple food.

study of comic strips in a private, critical daily Zimbabwean newspaper can tell us more about the way in which Zimbabweans have worked out the changes in their everyday life as a result of the crisis.

Comic strips in Zimbabwe

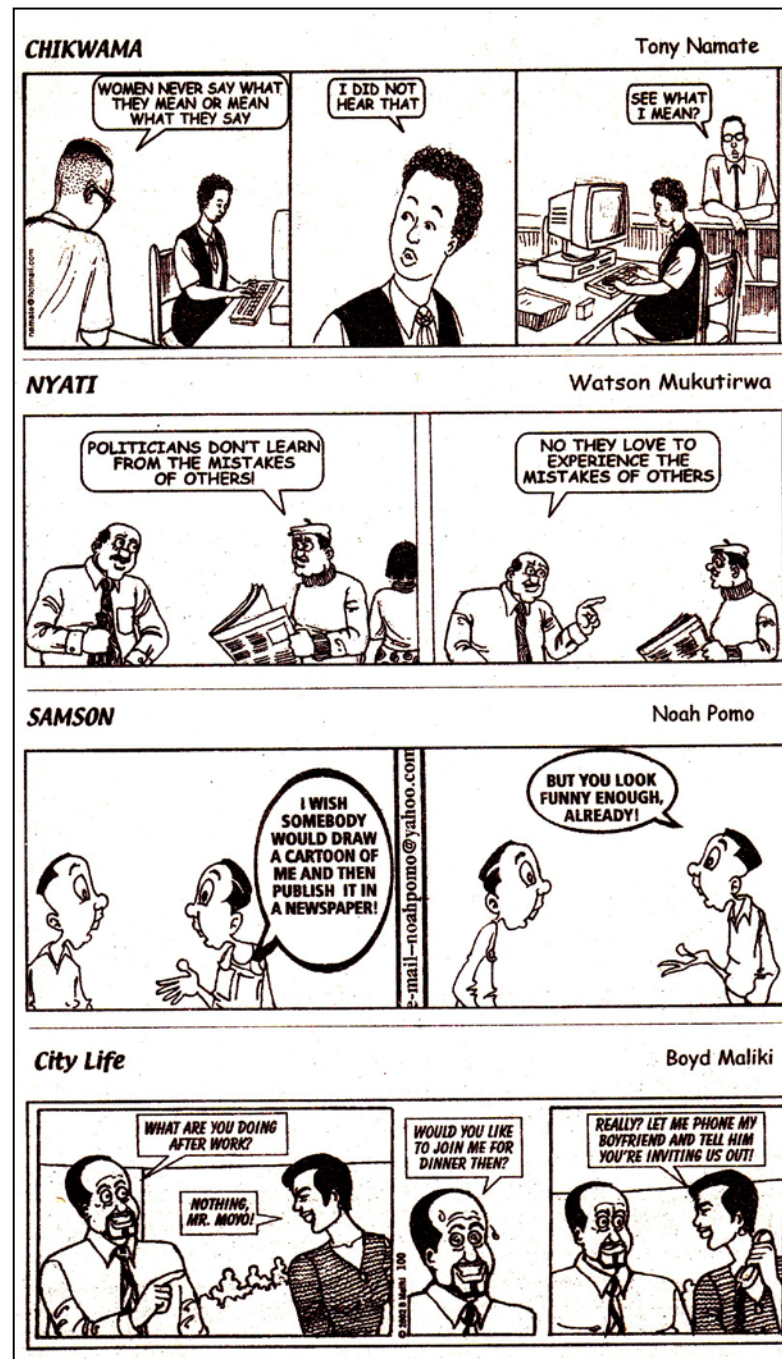
Until recently, newspaper editors in Zimbabwe often used syndicated international comic strips from outside the country such as *Hagar the Horrible*, *Andy Capp* and *Fred Bassett* for publication in their newspapers. As McLoughlin (1989: 217) has argued, the Zimbabwean comic strip has “long been on the fringe of popular culture, neglected as much by artists as by editors and their financiers”. Although magazines such as *Parade*, *Moto* and *Prize* had local comic strips, the main daily national newspaper *The Herald* relied on imports. However, with the launch of the private newspaper *The Daily News* in March 1999, Zimbabwean cartoonists were offered a full page to publish their work in a new paper that rapidly gained popularity among Zimbabweans. This can to a large extent be attributed to the enthusiasm for cartoons and comic strips on the part of Geoff Nyarota, *The Daily News*’ editor. Together with Boyd Maliki, Nyarota had been involved in a strip called *Nyati* in the 1980s.

The Daily News made a deliberate attempt to provide an alternative to the pro-government daily newspaper *The Herald* that had been publishing since independence in 1980, and was known as *The Rhodesia Herald* before Independence. Whereas both government print and electronic media relied to a large extent on the official voice of government elites, *The Daily News* sought to be a paper for “the common man in the streets”. Instead of relying on expert views, *The Daily News* felt ordinary Zimbabweans also had opinions which were worth recording. Especially in the run-up to the 2000 parliamentary elections, the paper rapidly increased its popularity. This, however, was also noted by the government which in the past has tried through various means to prevent the paper from publishing. Ultimately, in September 2003, the paper was forced to close down 4.5 years after it started publishing.

Cartoons and comic strips are generally seen as a marginal genre within newspapers. I consider a cartoon an image in a singular frame with no narrative. By contrast, a comic strip comprises a sequence of images which tell a particular story. Governments do not consider these to be of any importance. They assume that readers are more influenced by news articles. In Zimbabwe, numerous journalists from *The Daily News* have been arrested but cartoonists have generally been left alone. The indirect, ambiguous and polysemic character of comic strips and cartoons makes them less explicit in their meaning and therefore particularly suitable as forms of political critique. Cartoons and comic strips can be read and interpreted in various ways which makes it more difficult and less straightforward for governments to target them with legal measures. In spite of government disregard, cartoons and comic strips are very popular with newspaper readers in Zimbabwe. Readers often turn to the cartoon section before reading other parts of the newspaper. Cartoons are stuck to walls in homes, internet cafes, hair salons and copy shops, and they often provoke conversations among people.

Although in Zimbabwe comic strips in newspapers generally used to deal with social issues, such as infidelity, relationships, gender, they gradually came to address more political topics such as the economic crisis with which Zimbabweans were increasingly confronted. The new generation of comic strips in *The Daily News* started to focus on the hours and hours that Zimbabweans had to spend in queues in order to obtain basic commodities, the way in which watching television programmes on the monopoly state broadcaster Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation became a very boring exercise when messages praising and commending the regime were repeated constantly.

In *The Daily News*, cartoons were positioned on a page which also included the paper's editorial, opinion pieces and preceding a page with Letters to the Editor. On the other hand, comic strips were placed towards the end of the paper. Initially, *The Daily News* had three comic strips but from March 2002, the paper carried four: Chikwama by Tony Namate, Nyati by Watson Mukutirwa, Samson by Noah Pomo and City Life by Boyd Maliki.



From: *The Daily News*, 22 July 2002, p. 29.

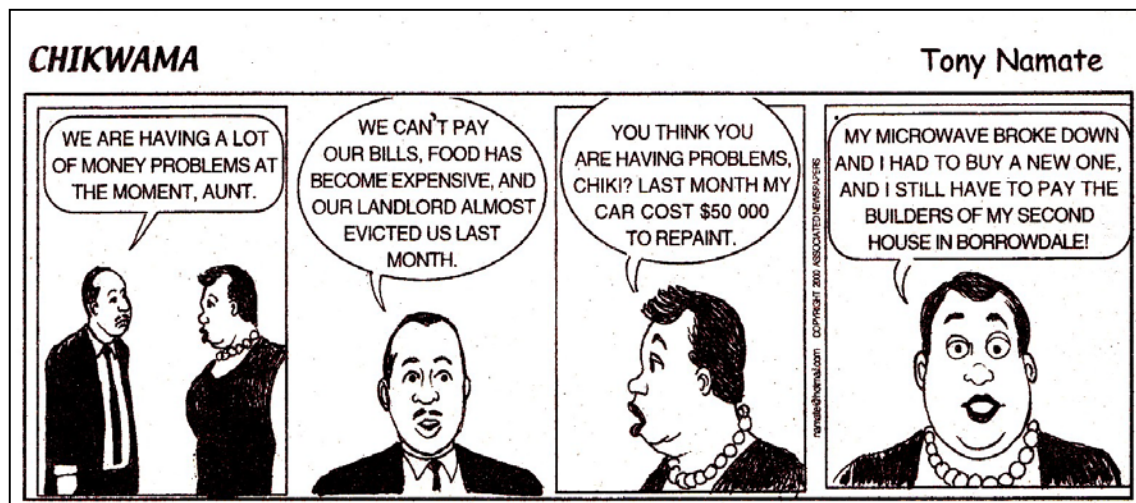
These cartoons are targeting an educated, literate audience, e.g. office workers, rural teachers, secretaries, civil servants. Although they combine images with text in English, they are in fact

not that visual, in the sense that the images do not always tell a story on their own. The strips mainly represent talk or dialogues between people, and involve them doing little other activities. Perhaps only City Life sometimes expresses something else than talk. I would therefore argue that the text is crucial to these comic strips and the image is secondary. This means that one needs to be literate (in English) in order to understand these cartoon.

The comic strip Chikwama

The focus in this paper is on the comic strip Chikwama which appeared at the top of the comic page in *The Daily News*. Chikwama is drawn by Tony Namate, who is currently probably the most well-known cartoonist in Zimbabwe, and who has received several awards for his work. Chikwama is a strip about an 'ordinary' Zimbabwean man struggling with all the economic and political changes around him. The word Chikwama has several meanings in Zimbabwe's major local language Shona. It literally means wallet or purse, an object that is probably no longer very useful in Zimbabwe because of the hyperinflation. The stacks and stacks of notes that Zimbabweans carry around as a result of high inflation need to be kept in something that is bigger than a wallet, a small bag perhaps. The word Chikwama also refers more generally to money in the urban slang that is spoken in the capital Harare. Furthermore, it can also in an informal sense mean someone who is difficult to shrug off, someone who always sticks with you, wherever you go.

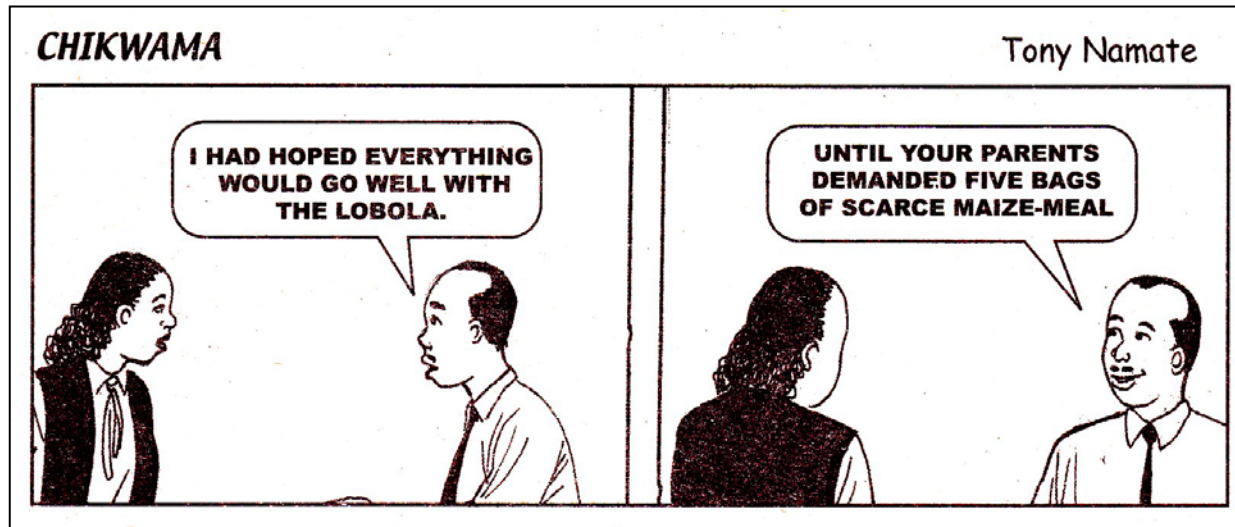
In the strip in *The Daily News*, we see Chikwama, or Chiki as he is known to his friends, socializing with a variety of people, frequenting beer halls, hanging out drinking and joking with his friends. Chikwama is positioned as not a particularly wealthy man. For example, in the following strip we see Chikwama talking to his more upper-class auntie:



From: *The Daily News*, 18 November 2001, p. 22.

Chikwama's auntie complains about the problems that are affecting her as an upper class Zimbabwean woman. She has to repaint her car, buy a new microwave and on top of that, she needs to pay off the mortgage of her second house in Borrowdale, which is an affluent suburb in Harare where a lot of cabinet ministers live. As reader, our sympathy is drawn to Chikwama who is struggling to pay his bills. Cartoonist Namate expects the reader to go through similar problems as Chikwama and addresses through Chikwama the struggles Zimbabweans go through on a daily basis.

Another issue that Chikwama and his friends are struggling with are the food shortages. They are trying hard to find food in the shops, spent hours and hours queuing, which again means we are mainly dealing with urbanites here, not people who are growing their food themselves, as in the rural areas. The following comic shows Chikwama talking to his future wife about *lobola* (bride price).



From: *The Daily News*, 12 April 2002, p. 30.

Whereas lobola these days is normally paid in cash, Chikwama is shocked to hear that his future in-laws are demanding payment in maize meal! How is he going to take care of that? In this instance, maize becomes even more precious than money. One can have money, but that does not mean that one can buy maize. Maize therefore becomes an extremely valuable commodity that can almost replace money as a means of exchange.

In another strip we see one of Chiki's friends who has found a solution to the food shortages: he has started to attend funerals in order to get a decent meal.

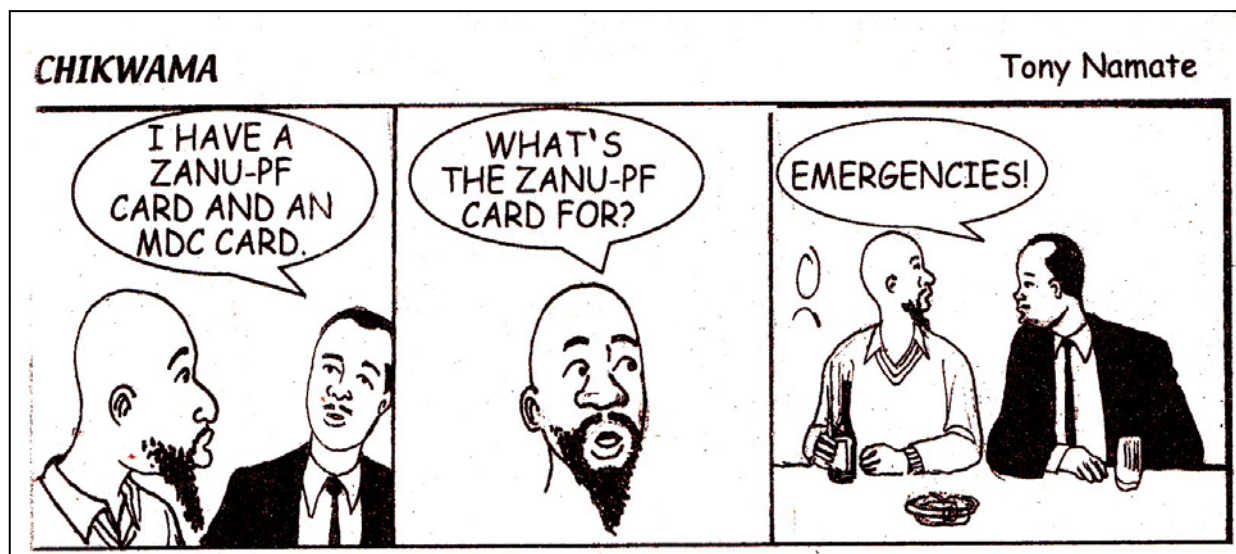


From: *The Daily News*, 29 May 2002, p. 29.

Funerals in Zimbabwe are generally accompanied with large quantities of food, sadza and meat. This strip shows how these sad occasions suddenly became events to indulge in.

In the examples I have shown we see how Chiki and his friends are making attempts to cope with the deteriorating economic and social conditions in Zimbabwe but we do not learn why the situation has changed, we do not get to know the cause of the problems. There is no agent, there are victims. However, they are not trapped in their victimhood, they have found creative ways to deal with the situation, and have therefore been attributed agency again.

The same holds for the changing political situation. The emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change on the Zimbabwean political scene in 1999 came to pose a serious threat to the ruling party ZANU PF. Political violence against the opposition became common, especially in the run-up to parliamentary and presidential elections. The following strip shows how Chiki has been dealing with these political tensions.

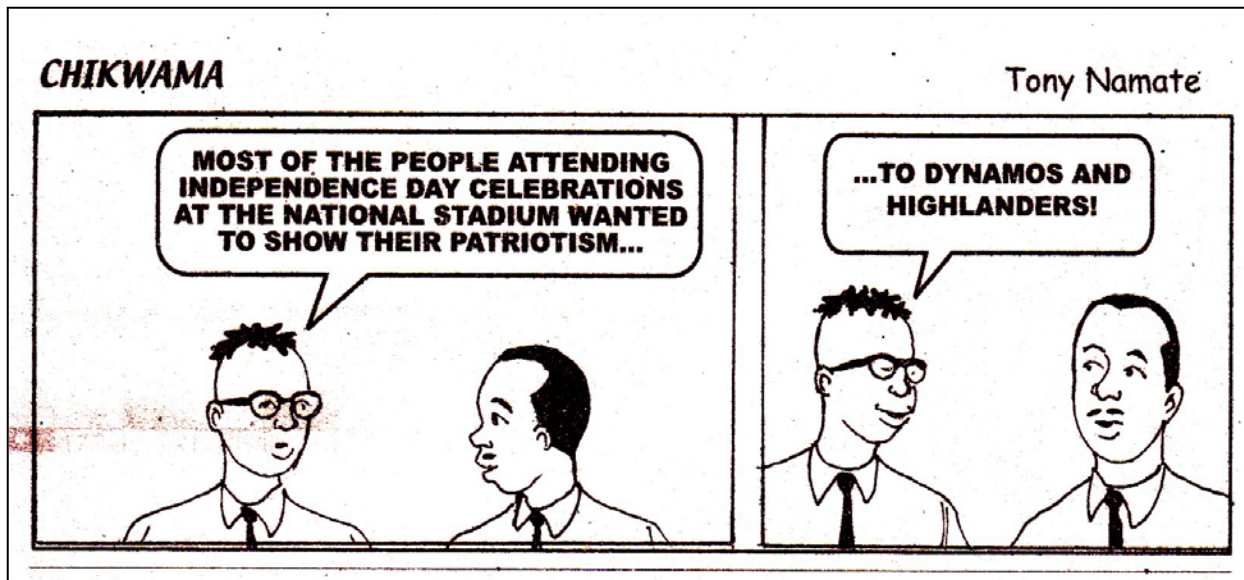


From: *The Daily News*, 15 November 2001, p. 26.

Chikwama has bought not only a MDC card but also a ZANU PF card in case of emergencies. Namate here suggests that the implied reader of the strip is probably more sympathetic to the MDC than to ZANU PF. It is self-evident that Chiki would have a MDC card but perhaps at first sight not so clear why he would also have a ZANU PF card. However, he just wishes to protect himself in case he would come across representatives of the ruling party who would ask him for his card.

This ambivalence between on the one hand resisting the regime but at the same time participating in its rituals in order to survive, is perhaps what Mbembe (2001: 110, 128) would refer to as “the intimacy of tyranny” which according to him inscribes “the dominant and the dominated within the same episteme”. It shows how the ruled are unable to resist and therefore are forced to join in the rituals of the state. Ultimately though, they are fooling the state by pretending to be ruling party supporters. But when it comes to voting day, they will express their true vote which will be for the opposition party.

A similar situation is shown in the following strip:



From: *The Daily News*, 2 May 2002, p. 27.

We see Chikwama's friend talking about the annual Independence celebrations, always held on 18 April in Rufaro Stadium in Mbare which is one of the oldest high-density suburbs in Harare. Chikwama's friend suggests that most people attending are not really doing so because they want to show their patriotism to the nation. As a result of the crisis in Zimbabwe, people are no longer interested to celebrate their Independence. Some may even argue the country needs a second liberation struggle. However, the Independence celebrations are always followed by a soccer match between Zimbabwe's most popular clubs, in this case the Dynamos from Harare and Highlanders from Bulawayo. There is a catch though, in order to attend the match, people are required to be in the stadium in the morning which means they are forced to attend the official Independence celebrations as well. No one will be admitted to the stadium after the start of the Independence celebrations. Entertainment therefore comes at a price. However, at a time when Zimbabweans are deprived of leisure options, it is a price Chikwama and his friends are willing to pay.

Conclusion

These examples show how comic strips have presented a powerful commentary upon the suffering of 'ordinary' Zimbabweans. Without clearly naming the agent that caused Zimbabweans' deprivation, cartoonists left it to their audiences to interpret the reasons for their misery. Comic strips were in what Spitulnik (2002: 179) 'diffused dialogues, not direct dialogues, with the state'.

At a time when people's everyday lives dramatically changed as a result of the economic and political crisis in the country, comic strips gave expression to the various ways in which these changes were 'worked out' by Zimbabweans. Comic strips provide alternative representations of ways in which Zimbabweans have dealt with their rulers to discourses in the mainstream media and some academic analyses. Comic strips show the complexity of relations between rulers and ruled in the postcolony. Their relation is never simply a dichotomy between resistance and passivity, autonomy and subjection. In order to survive in the postcolony, the ruled connive with the ruled, participate in their rituals but at the same time toy with their power and control in what Mbembe (2001) calls "the intimacy of tyranny".

Secondly, the examples which I have given have also demonstrated how Zimbabwe's lively informal and verbal culture in which jokes, gossip and rumour play important roles can be integrated into the perhaps more formal and written form of the comic strip. The way in which Chikwama engages, participates and listens to pavement radio make this particular strip very much part of everyday talk in Zimbabwe. 'Pavement radio' both feeds into comic strips and can also result into more talk when readers start discussing the comic strip they have seen in the newspapers.

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