



Map 19.1. East Africa. Map by Christopher Becker.

Teeth Appear Themselves

Laughter and Humor in East Africa

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In many parts of East Africa, people travel between towns and within cities in minivans or trucks converted into public buses. The drivers and conductors pack the buses with people and, when seats remain unoccupied, the driver waits until he has enough customers to fill all seats. Filling the bus entails stuffing the vehicle with enough paying customers that passengers become envious of those walking outside, even in the heat of the day. In this claustrophobic environment, people tend to talk to each other, share stories, and commiserate. It is as if the bus becomes a temporary micro-community of shared experience. To get through this journey, where people pay to be packed into a vehicle with one another and, often, to sit in traffic, they try to enjoy their time together rather than lament their predicament.

Both authors ride these buses frequently. Once you get over the lack of airflow, let alone air conditioning, you realize that there is something magical about *some* of these journeys. Conversations emerge about social norms and politics, recent environmental issues, or a bit of news read in the local paper. While subdued conversation takes place on many of these rides, often a bus ride is so full of banter you would think you were at a family gathering. Our collaborative fieldwork shows how these rides are microcosms for many aspects of East African life. Passengers tell long stories, pulling you into the trials of their lives or into narratives about someone they know. It is customary for storytellers on these rides to raise their voices so that all can hear the story being told. And many rides entail laughter, a few of them turning into long, memorable stretches of gut-wrenching amusement, despite the lack of personal space.

On one such ride in Dar es Salaam—a coastal Tanzanian city of about four and half million people—Perullo sat in the far back of

the bus on a hot and humid July day. The packed bus, referred to as a *daladala* in Tanzania, travelled on a severely potholed road that made the journey especially challenging. Upon reaching a sizable pothole, which the bus was unable to traverse, a man with a bucket appeared outside the van at the driver's window. The man said he would fill the pothole for a fee. The driver paid him, and the man filled the pothole with crushed stone and sand. The bus crossed over the filled pothole and continued its journey.

After dropping off a few passengers, the bus turned a corner and moved along another road, whereupon it came to another large pothole. Standing next to this pothole was the same man with his bucket. This was a different road, nearly a mile from the last. The passengers started to laugh and make up stories about how the man reached the second pothole so quickly. Perhaps he tunneled through the potholes to get from one place to another; perhaps he was training for soccer and running with a bucket full of rocks to each spot where a car needed to pass; perhaps he had magic powers connected to the potholes.

Ultimately, many people were impressed with the man's scheme: filling potholes when a bus came, receiving a tip to fill the hole, and then removing the rocks from the hole to take to the next pothole in hopes of another tip. They did not blame him for the potholes and instead laughed about the inability of the Tanzanian government to repair local roads. Several jokes emerged about austerity measures and the rebuilding of a new, prosperous Tanzania through the man with the bucket. The humor continued for the rest of the trip as riders marveled at both the heroics of the man and the deplorable state of infrastructure in Tanzania. No person disembarked from the bus without a smile on his or her face.

Similar to other parts of the world, life in urban areas of East Africa can be challenging: frequent traffic jams, long lines at government offices, electricity blackouts, high unemployment, and crime make these urban areas both socially and economically difficult. Despite these challenges, or perhaps because of them, people use humor to laugh at their situations and enjoy the communities in which they live. There are comedians who perform at packed clubs; television, internet, and radio shows that feature humorous comedy sketches; cartoons that appear daily in local newspapers; jokes that circulate widely; songs that provide witty insights into daily life; and a proliferation of social media that features humorous posts. Though it is impossible to avoid problems in urban areas, it is also difficult to miss the smiling faces,

the witty banter, the thoughtful play on words, and jocular encounters that people have daily. Even on crowded buses on potholed streets on a hot day, people use laughter to both critique and improve the world around them.

Humor is an important form of social engagement found among all human communities. Studies suggest that humor may have emerged as a means for people to form intimate bonds within a group, to demonstrate sophisticated language and cognitive abilities, or as a method of courtship.¹ In East Africa, humor reveals a great deal about problems that people see within society. The comedy that receives the most attention in popular media, such as radio and newspapers, focuses on personal narratives that demonstrate the absurdity of situations. People laugh at a man with a bucket of rocks because they all know and understand the decay of the country's infrastructure and the incompetence of political leaders. The name of the president never needs to be mentioned, nor the specific funding agencies that deal with road works. Instead, laughing at someone filling potholes with a large bucket demonstrates a shared attitude that these things should not occur, and that the government should do more to take care of roadways. Interestingly, conversations on public transport rarely turn political in the sense of individual comments on or condemnation of a political leader. Humor is enough to reveal people's attitudes and underlying beliefs.

Humor exists in many aspects of daily life within East Africa. Comedy films, in particular, are both popular and widely circulated. Many consider the artist King Majuto, whose real name is Amri Athuman, the most successful film comedian in Tanzania. His hundreds of films over the past thirty years have made him one of the most reliable and entertaining comedians working in the country. Audiences can rent or buy his films in almost any major market in the country. His films are shown on long bus rides that traverse the region and in daladalas that travel between rural towns. Proprietors of hair salons, barbershops, hotels, and large apartment complexes have televisions that show his films along with a mix of other local and foreign movies. There are film houses, referred to as *mabanda ya kuonyesha video*, where audiences can pay a small fee, around ten cents, to see a Majuto film. Even in squatter communities throughout Dar es Salaam, televisions found in communal areas show his comedy films. While Majuto is not the only successful actor in the country, there is a reliability in both the regularity of his films (on average, Majuto acts in over thirty