



The Logic of Laughter and the Ecology of Ethno- Cultural Representation in Nigerian Stand-up Comedy

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As a veritable form of popular cultural expression, stand-up comedy is believed to derive its animating force and performative energies from a playful teasing of society. There is, therefore, the underlying assumption that there exists a logic of laughter which is consistent with, and definitive of, this oral art form. However, what is sometimes not sufficiently theorized and acknowledged in critical discourses negotiating stand-up comedy is the inscription of provocative statements and powerful commentaries which underwrite the ethnic/national cultural imaginary generated by the comedians. This investment of stand-up comedy with alternative lineaments beyond the psychological therapy of laughter radically destabilizes the sometimes frozen boundaries between laughter/humor and the more serious pathologies of the human condition. In this essay I engage stand-up comedy as an oral performance event whose primary aspiration is the production and consumption of laughter/humor as popular commodities. But beyond this logic of laughter, I discursively frame the form as an ecology for the politics of ethno-cultural representation, employing Nigeria as analytic paradigm. My sustained argument in the essay is that stand-up comedy possesses the incredible capacity to name, claim but also blame and shame Nigerian ethno-cultures in its politics of representation. Using Umberto Eco's theoretical insights concerning the complexities and peculiarities associated with laughter, I insist that Nigerian stand-up comedy performs the oppositional binarist function of laughter but also volunteers serious commentary on ethno-cultural habits.

Keywords: Nigerian stand-ups, laughter/humor, stereotypes, popular culture, ethnic identity, cultural politics, representation

Introduction

By its very nature, stand-up comedy is an oral performance initiative. Like other verbal art forms, it proceeds from an oral culture and goes into it. It thrives on the authority and integrity of the spoken word and the theatricality as well as the improvisational accomplishments of the comedian before a live, active audience. The participating audience intervenes in the performance process through uproarious laughter, clapping, and running commentary often in approbation but sometimes in reprobation of the art. Therefore, the audience involvement performs a dual, contradictory function: to raise the tempo of the performance by kindling its flames or to douse the embers. This is crucial because the efficacy of the comic art is contingent on the cognitive satisfaction of the audience through their imprimatur and seal of approval. Thus, audience psychology is important to stand-ups because it arbitrates as a public tribunal.

The utilitarian potential of comedy inheres in its entertainment/relaxation value. This is its capacity to intrigue and overwhelm with humor and light-heartedness. The critical question always is: did the audience laugh? If not, then there is something wrong with the art. But where humor ends, bold and serious commentary begins. This cohabitation of playful teasing and hard commentary introduces a meta-message which is richly layered and excessively encoded beneath the logic of laughter and its larger entailments. Thus, the boundary between calculated laughter and light-hearted humor and sometimes bilious indictment and censorious denunciation becomes fluid, indeterminate or blurred. Where humor imposes its boundary is precisely where powerful social commentary establishes its self-presence. This is why it is often claimed that humor offers social criticism or scurrilous commentary through portraying and indirectly condemning inappropriate and deviant behavior (Mitchell 92). However, it is incontrovertible that comedy can also target normalized hegemonic or official conduct emanating from the state and the larger society.

In this essay, I investigate how stand-up comedy participates in the construction of ethno-cultural representations and the consolidation and legitimation of ethnic/national identity formation processes in Nigeria through the powerful sieve of running laughter and dripping humor while inscribing insightful commentaries about the nation's pathologies, morbidities and corpus of contradictions. I am interested in coming to terms with the governing impetus for this emergent art form in the Nigerian entertainment industry and why it has acquired great valence and relevance lately. What constitutive factors, for instance, have conspired to make stand-up comedy such a popular oral performance engagement in Nigeria? Why has the business of producing and consuming laughter or humor suddenly become a serious business once enjoyed by football and Nollywood video-films in Nigeria? What are the production protocols that mediate this art and in what ways do the practitioners engage their audiences and appeal to their cognitive sensibilities? How do they generate the content of their productions and how do the audiences critically evaluate and receive these offerings? What, indeed, is the logic behind laughter/humor?

The above questions are critical to the concerns of the essay because in a digimodern dispensation where new media and communication technologies have become ubiquitous and reached vertiginous heights, the human person has become a torn personality with superfluous information at their disposal. The instant availability of information when and where it is needed has empowered many, even in peripheral societies like the postcolonial world, even though economic liberalization policies have impoverished many more with their accompanying negative repercussions. Digital media and satellite communication have reinforced popular cultural activities like sports, film, music and particularly stand-up comedy and influenced the consumption patterns that over-determine its production (Nwankwo, 2022).

Between Laughter and Humor as Comic Categories

In this essay, laughter and humor have been used interchangeably as if they are synonymous. As categories of the comic, they are cousins and do share some kindredship and common characteristic features. For instance, they both communicate orally but also through writing. As forms of communication, they express the psychic and psychological states of the human person. Besides being forms of verbal expression, they are also united by the potential to create an atmosphere that is funny, relaxed and entertaining. But it will be uncritical to assume that because of their comic credentials, they are undifferentiated as linguistic units with similar semantic value and signifying possibilities. Indeed, comedy, laughter and humor are themselves slippery categories, dependent on subjective perspectives and open to multiple intentions and shifting, elastic interpretations (Keisalo 102).

Despite the commonalities, subtle antinomies exist between laughter and humor. For instance, it is easier to define laughter because aurally and visually, we can hear and see laughter but not humor (Ziv 9). While humor is commonly associated with laughter and they are assumed to be interdependent, there can be laughter without humor just like there can be humor without laughter (Sciama 2). Humor suggests situations that are funny, amusing and jocular in character and temperament. These situations and contexts may be games, stories, songs, or ordinary conversations which may have a humorous thread running through them and which may evoke laughter. But laughter does not necessarily suggest that a situation is funny, amusing or jocular. Laughter can conceal attitudes and emotions which are in radical contradistinction to humor. These may be anger, arrogance, bitterness, betrayal, defiance, despair, disappointment, fear, frustration, hatred, rebellion, and a desire for vengeance. Laughter sometimes shares these qualities with smiling.

Stand-up comedy provides a performance and entertainment site under which laughter and humor are mobilized as comic categories for the cognition of the audience. It is, therefore, important to observe that the utilitarian value of stand-up comedy inheres in its entertainment potentials and social corrective vision. Humor/laughter heals as much as it can also injure. Its healing properties reside precisely in its incredible capacity as a homeostatic mechanism to create psychological conditions which serve as conduits for the purgation and release of stored up psychic energies, feelings or emotions. Ted Cohen observes that most humor has great potential for encouraging or even healing those who are suffering (10). This psychological unburdening may be temporary or permanent. There is also a liberational or redemptive quality about laughter/humor as it relieves and frees.

But laughter also humiliates and causes pain especially if it is directed at others in a manner that exposes and emphasizes their weaknesses or inadequacies. This humiliation and pain are more pronounced and deeply felt if the other/victim is not permitted to respond to the offensive laughter either by ruling ideologies, social conventions or asymmetrical power relations which seek to erect hierarchies or dominant authority (Billig 2). This is why Critchley observes that the best form of laughter is that which is directed at oneself (64).

Theorizing Laughter/Humor in the Context of Stand-up Comedy

There are many theories of humor/laughter which seek to explain their nature and social functions. Some of the theories are rooted in psychology and understand humor/laughter as psychological conditions which are therapeutic and healthy. Others are seeded in spirituality and consider these concepts as mystical. Of these theories, the three most prominent are: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory. The relief theory argues that humor/laughter relieves inner psychological burdens and tensions (Schaefer 23). The superiority theory dates back to the early western philosophers: Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. It argues that humor/laughter expresses the superiority of more fortunate individuals in relation to the misfortunes and humbling conditions of others. The incongruity theory is based on Kantian reason. It perceives humor/laughter as the realization of the difference between a concept and the real objects in relation to the concept.

There is no unanimity among humor/laughter researchers as to which of these theories best explains the nature, scope and social functionality of the concepts. There is also no consensus as to which of the theories can most competently provide the framework for analyzing humor/laughter (Berger 19). However, the underlying dominant assumption common to them is that humor/laughter expresses and performs certain functions thereby foregrounding their essential functionality. This element of functionality is a formulation which provides penetrating theoretical insights into my engagement with Nigerian stand-up comedy as an art form which employs the logic of laughter as a veritable vehicle for the negotiation of ethno-cultural representations in Nigeria. In other words, stand-up comedy is not an end in itself. It does not exist in a vacuum. It has functional value and significance. It provides the animating backdrop through which the comics mobilize their creative afflatus to seriously engage society through the playful medium of humor/laughter.

Umberto Eco's reflections on laughter/humor also offer useful thoughts that help crystallize the discussion. In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco argues that laughter is what humanizes us as rational beings created in the image of God. We laugh because God himself *laughed* the human being and the created world into existence. Laughter is first and foremost of/from God. He observes: "The moment God laughed seven gods were born who governed the world, the moment he burst out laughing light appeared, at his second laugh appeared water, and on the seventh day of his laughing appeared the soul (467).

Laughter, therefore, creates; animates. It brought into existence everything in the order of creation including humanity. Human materiality was also assured through laughter. It confers humanity on persons and makes them *homo ridens*, creatures that laugh. This makes humanity unique, a distinctive creature from other creatures that lack rationality. Humanity is also *homo risibilus*, a laughable creature who can be laughed at. Laughter, therefore, has a purpose; a function. It humanizes; it rationalizes human beings. It is a language which is intelligible. It makes us much more deeply aware of our humanity and throws into relief the contradictions that define and mediate our human condition. Eco insists that what distinguishes humanity from other creatures is that human beings have comic feelings and a sense of humor/laughter.

Eco's ideas have proved revolutionary in philosophy and theology as they have ruptured the postulations of the classical philosophers. Plato, for instance, viewed laughter as dangerous, especially when it was excessive. In *The Republic* (1943), he considered laughter as an agent of violence. Laughter, therefore, does not normalize the *polis* but rather disrupts it. He, therefore, suggested that fines should be imposed on those who injure others psychologically through laughter. He distinguished between lower and

higher humor: the former debases while the latter elevates. On his part, Aristotle equated laughter with irrational, animalistic tendencies. In *The Poetics* (1961), he considered laughter as the imitation of inferior people and a disgraceful species. The comedic art is also ignoble as it wears an ugly mask.

This desacralizing idea of laughter was uncritically received by the church which viewed laughter/humor/comedy as sinful, unserious and so without any function or purpose. However, Eco's formulation on laughter shifts the discourse in ways that intersect philosophy and theology and suggests their rootedness not only in being and the divine but also in the comic. Rather than apprehend laughter as ungodly and a negation of human rationality and nobility, Eco submits that laughter, humor and comedy have their provenance in God as it was God who fashioned everything through laughter. For instance, if Christ was not seen laughing, he certainly created humorous scenes/situations which drew laughter from his audiences. His parables and real encounters with people especially the religious establishment elicited humor sometimes. An example is the parable of a person who has a log in their eye but is more interested in removing a speck in another person's eye. Another instance can be given of the woman who was caught in adultery and when Jesus put his accusers to the test to cast the first stone, they all went away beginning with the eldest. The picture of withdrawal must have created a humorous scene. Jesus's humor was somehow dry, not dripping but worked mostly like political jabs thrown at opponents, what political cartoons do in the media today. Laughter/humor, therefore, necessarily has a function and purpose which stand-up comedy acknowledges and promotes.

Ethno-cultural Representations in Nigerian Stand-ups

In an attempt to discursively respond to the range of issues implicated in the logic of laughter/humor and Nigerian stand-up comedy, I shall now focus on the sociology and anthropology of this popular art form and its distinctive performance equipment. Nigerian stand-up owes its emergence, growth and efflorescence from the existential experiences of the *folk*. It is a popular art whose provenance can be located in the contradictions of everyday Nigerian life. It represents the citizens' spirited struggles to negotiate the shifting patterns of a deregulated, hostile economy and the chaotic lifestyles it imposes on the populace. It exists in the interstices of the creative lives of the people through street stories and popular narratives forged in diverse publics/domains and in the loric traditions of the populace. Precarious socio-economic conditions and the pressures and uncertainties precipitated by structural adjustment measures provided the backdrop for the art to emerge. Through the creative mobilization of laughter/humor, stand-up comedy stood in the gap and modulated the quotidian everyday realities with a playful foreground and elicited popular responses from the people. The popular and the everyday therefore define the stand-up comedic culture/tradition in Nigeria.

It is, therefore, a unique form which has developed in fidelity to the socio-economic, political and cultural environment. This context is evident in the complexion of issues the comedic text grapples with. The issues broadly range from political corruption, economic hardship, poverty, failed/deficit infrastructure, immorality, insecurity, official brigandage, hypocrisy of church ministers, the lives of celebrities, and crucially the representation of ethno-cultural categories and the politics that undergird it. The signifying practices of the art, its meaning architecture and the skillful manner of the telling and re-telling by the comics resonate strongly with the people. They see their lived experiences *performed* in the art. They are, therefore, drawn to the lure of the performances.

There are quite a number of stand-up comedians in Nigeria. They include among others: Ali Baba, Basket Mouth, Akpororo, I Go Dye, Helen Paul, Julius Agwu, Gbenga Adeyinka, Acapella, Seyi Law, Gordons, etc. They are the humor merchants who “crack yo ribs” with “laff matters” during “nites of a thousand and one laffs”, to appropriate the popular idiom. Many of them are known by their pseudonyms or stage names. They also represent the ethnic and cultural diversity of Nigeria. Many times they register their ethno-cultural belonging in their performances through language use and occasionally costumes. The comedic terrain was dominated by men but in recent times, some women have also entered the profession. I will focus my analysis mainly on Gordons, and also draw from the acts of Ali Baba and I Go Dye where necessary. My choice is dictated by the virtuosity and skill of the artists, the range of their repertoire, the relevance of the themes they deploy to my study and their popularity as comedians.

Gordons (Godwin Komone) is Urhobo from Nigeria’s Delta State. He has an incredible repertory of knowledge; a whole trajectory of anecdotes, proverbs and jokes which he fashions almost effortlessly to entertain. He possesses a rich quarry of ideas, a storehouse of tropes. Quite often, he opens his acts with proverbs: “If you want to know that the millipede has many legs, attend its wedding”; and “If you want to know the difference between water and acid, splash them on your face” (*Gordons Comedy Klinik Ward 1*). There is also a religionic temperament to his performances. Lexical choices like “anointing”, “ministry”, “halleluiah”, “offering”, “tithe”, etc. mark his “ecclesiastical” language. This is an obvious mimicry and satirization of pentecostal new religion and its linguistic habits, particularly in Nigeria where charismatic tele-evangelists in expensive French suits compete with one another in their evangelizing and proselytizing zealotry for the impoverished souls of their congregations.

How and why this register finds its way into comedy foregrounds the humorous content of Gordons’ performances. “Halleluiah” particularly punctuates his performances as the word serves as a veritable interlude or nodal point which signals the end of one comedic episode and the transition to another unit of thought. Indeed, his performances are aptly described as *klinics*, an orthographic corruption of the medical term “clinic”. This peculiar medical register underscores the therapeutic essence of his comedic career which functions as a healing ministry from poverty, disappointment, sorrow, worry, frustration, stress, anger, fear, etc. As such, he routinely deploys medical metaphors.

Nigeria is a conglomeration of languages and cultures. The total number of Nigerian languages is believed to be 550 (Blench vi). This makes Nigeria a linguistic melting pot. The bewildering assortment of cultures and ethnicities represents what Ali Mazrui and Alamin Mazrui refer to as a tower of Babel, a linguistic laboratory (1). Indeed, Nigeria’s ethno-cultural and linguistic configuration is like a riotous assemblage of the colors of the national flags in the world. Each of these cultures and ethnicities secretes peculiar traits which many times necessitate the construction of stereotypes about them which are carried over into stand-ups. The stereotypes are usually associated with received knowledges which are not critically evaluated and examined but become freely and widely circulated in the popular and official media and so acquire assumed veracity though without scientific scrutiny.

A stereotype, therefore, is a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a person or thing. It is a structured set of beliefs about the characteristics of members of social categories and influences how people attend to, encode, represent, and retrieve information about others, and how they judge and respond to them. Stereotypes are, therefore, false or misleading generalizations about groups that render them largely, though not entirely, immune to counterevidence (Blum 251). To Schneider, stereotypes are the common codes of social interaction which are ubiquitous, infectious, irritating, and hard to get rid of (1). The element of commonality makes stereotypes shared group beliefs as perceived by others (McGarty 2). Pickering observes that stereotypes and the

constructions of otherness operate as analogous categories (xi). This makes stereotypes both individual and cultural phenomena (Charles Stangor and Mark Schaller 4). Embedded in the performance structures of Nigerian stand-ups are stereotypes about ethnic and cultural others which ridicule them and incite laughter/humor.

Gordons particularly finds these stereotypes a fertile furrow to plough in his performances. In this ethnic and cultural schema, the majorities and minorities are juxtaposed and made to bear the obnoxious yoke of sometimes cruel jokes which evoke humor and laughter. The majority Igbo, Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba are usually the victims of the comedy. But also the minorities like the Bini, Urhobo, Efik and Ijaw are not spared the searing comedic barbs. The Igbo of the East are presented as creative, industrious, and enterprising but also materialistic, ostentatious, and dishonest, especially in business. Their love for money is unrivalled. The Yoruba of the West are educated and familiar with establishment matters but are fetishistic, superstitious and vainglorious. The Hausa-Fulani are shrewd politicians but not well educated so behave foolishly; they also have harems and excessive children they can hardly cater for.

The Urhobo and the Ijaw of the South-South are clever, sinister and tough. They drink heavily and have a natural knack for mischief. This is due to the protracted ferment of militancy which has characterized their historical and recent struggles for environmental justice and self-determination following the despoliation of their Niger Delta ancestral homeland by international monopoly capital under the guise of oil exploration and exploitation. The Ibibio/Efik are expert homemakers or domestic servants who know how to cook delicious meals. It is these stereotypes that underwrite and sometimes over-determine the concerns of the comics as they poke fun at these ethnicities and their cultures. The comics mimic their speech patterns, peculiar habits and traits and other associated illogicalities.

For instance, Gordons demonstrates how the Yoruba have a funny way of pronouncing words like airport, airplane, and airborne. In their peculiar way, they pronounce them as “earport”, “earplane”. The Yoruba are also portrayed as poor hagglers in market transactions. They hurl abuses at you when you fail to buy from them, calling you *were*, *olosi* and *olori buruku* meaning lunatic, wretch and good for nothing person respectively. However, the asymmetry consists in the fact that when the Yoruba want to buy from you, they will first offer a generous price for the item. The moment the seller agrees, they will lower the initial price, continue with the downward spiral and end up not buying the item. In other words, they become guilty of what they accuse “others” for not doing.

The Igbo are delineated in the comics as avaricious and rapacious, especially in mercantile activities. As Gordons affirms, every ethnicity loves money but the love of the Igbo for money is at “very high voltage” (Gordons Comedy Clinic Ward 5). To buttress this perspective, Ali Baba, another comedian, instantiates with an incident in a church when the pastor calls for the donation of a generating set for the energy needs of the church since the old one was weak. The cost of the new generator will cost a fortune. No one is willing to come out for the donation. After some period of introspection, Okoro, an Igbo man in the congregation, thinks of the business opportunity involved and smartly presents himself. The pastor is exceedingly gratified that at last the prospect of a new generator has been met only for Okoro to say that his generator will cost lower than the price quoted by the pastor. Here the love for money will not allow the Igbo man to donate generously and freely for a noble cause. Many Igbo traders are generous donors to religious causes but Gordons leverages on the stereotype of Igbo avarice which is pejorative and laughable.

Susan Purdie insists that characters are comic through a carefully structured culmination of incoherencies which renders their behavior incommensurate with their constructed motivations (81). For instance, an Igbo man was suffering from a grave medical pathology and was at the point of death. He slipped into coma and all his family

was at his bedside in solidarity with him hoping that he would miraculously recover. This meant that they abandoned the shop and the goods in it and so no money was coming in from the business. When the man finally came round and saw everyone by his bedside, the first utterance was a question: with everyone in the hospital, who was minding the shop? To this ailing and dying Igbo man, money meant much more to him than his life and the goodwill of his family.

In another incident involving an Igbo man, Gordons observes that if you have riches, your father will sometimes want to exchange his paternity with you and answer your name as if you are his father. The comic volunteers anecdotal evidence with his mother, adding an autobiographical dimension to his artistry. According to him, the first time he sent one million naira (Nigeria's currency) to his mother, she sent him a blank text message. When asked, the mother told him that she was so grateful and appreciative of his generosity that she was lost for words. Gordons should fill in the gaps with any message since she could not sufficiently express her gratitude.

Obscenities, satirical songs, insults against people, and ridiculous representation of some sacred beings, are also at the origins of comedy (Mauss161). In Comedy *Klinik Ward 5*, Gordons observes that an Igbo pastor in the Synagogue Church of All Nations located in Lagos, Nigeria and owned by the late Prophet T. B. Joshua, one of Nigeria's celebrated tele-evangelists, was delivering a lady possessed of evil spirits. The pastor asked the demon what its mission was in the life of the possessed lady. The demon responded that it was sent from the marine world to give the lady a billion naira. The pastor then sought to know secretly from the demon if it had delivered the money. When the demon refused, the pastor eagerly asked the demon to possess him instead so that he would become the owner of the money. This underscores the desperation of the Igbo man when it comes to money: he is willing to be possessed by a demon he was about to exorcise from a lady.

Geoff King argues that comedy has the potential to be both subversive, questioning the norms from which it departs, and affirmative, reconfirming that which it recognizes through the act of departure, or a mixture of the two (King 8). Gordons excoriates Igbo marriage customs and the exorbitant or extortionate bride wealth they ask for when their daughters are to marry. The couple starves after the wedding. The Igbo explain it away that when a man suffers for something he values it more. When a man pays heavily for the hand of a woman, he respects and treasures her. This also reduces frivolous incidents of divorce. The flip side, however, is that many prospective bachelors are finding the cost of bride-wealth prohibitive and intimidating. This makes them to be pathologically scared of marriage. Also, the argument about reduced rates of divorce as a result of high bride-wealth is reductionist and at best simplistic as divorce happens despite this. The lust for money, Gordons reasons, is the motivating force for the high cost of bride-price among the Igbo.

Audiences of stand-ups will accept unlikely or exaggerated characters if the comic performative expertise carries them through the presentation without jarring or registering as false (Wilkie 197). Accordingly, Gordons observes that something must kill someone and that a person must die for something. Many times that something is love. In love you must sacrifice and deny yourself. He proceeds to give a catalogue of those who died for love: Jesus loved and died for the economy of human salvation. Romeo and Juliet, eponymous characters in Shakespeare's drama, also died for love. He too loved a lady but refused to die, so he had to do something drastic, revolutionary and "crazy" to express the depth of his love. His love was staying in a military barracks and to demonstrate his love, he one day stormed the barracks gate and hit it with a hammer demanding that it should be opened.

Alarmed by the deafening report of the hammer and the bravado of the intruder, the Aboki (Hausa security guard) who stood sentry at the gate demanded to know who the trespasser was. Before long, a swarm of soldiers was at the gate like a hive of bees.

They asked him to frog jump and he refused to obey. One slapped him furiously, the kind of slap that will make you remember your great grandfather long dead. They promptly proceeded to drill him and asked him to carry sacks of sand. While this lasted, their superior who recognized him as a popular comedian ordered the soldiers to stop the ordeal and cautioned them against the humiliating treatment. Then the unexpected happened: the superior officer, instead of freeing him, asked him in a sympathetic voice to carry back all the sacks of sand, meaning double punishment.

Two realities are significant here. In Nigeria, because of long years of military interregnum and incursions in politics, soldiers have acquired a solid reputation for brutality and high-handedness. To storm a barracks full of soldiers in the name of love is to ask for a death warrant. The audience is well aware of this danger and it brings the full weight of the joke. Indeed, Gordons's daredevil antics negate the Tiv-Nigerian saying that instead of taking the risk for love when stung by rampaging bees, a fiancé will run in a direction different from that of the fiancée. In an ethno-cultural sense, the implication of the Hausa guard in the performance is also logical and symbolic. This is a routinized representation in much of Nigerian popular cultural performance poetics where the Hausa man is stereotypically delineated as a security guard whose life is regimented like a zombie and lacks ingenuity and creativity because of his supposed lack of formal education.

Lidia Sciama argues that paradoxes, contradictions, incongruities, nonsense and banter are the prototypic paradigms for humor and jokes (6). Gordons also argues that everything that exists in the world is in the Bible. He ties this epistemology and hermeneutics with Nigerian ethno-cultural ideologies and practices. He calls the Igbo the Jews of the Bible because of their shrewd business sense and posits that wherever and whenever you find three Igbo people, a business negotiation is involved. Even the three wise men in the Bible who came to visit the infant Jesus bearing treasures were from the East: the Igbo are also from the East of Nigeria.

The Hausa-Fulani are descendants of the biblical King David for whom in his old age a teen-age girl was provided to warm him. However, because of his senility, David could not consummate the arranged liaison. Gordons presents David's helpless condition in a salacious manner as his inability to have sexual relations with the girl meant that David's "ministry" was crumbling – he was dying. This is an analogous cultural experience in the North of Nigeria where girls are forcefully married to gerontocrats old enough to be their great grandfathers as a result of religious tenets and patriarchal cultural practices. Though this is an obvious joke which evokes humor in the audience, Gordons employs it to make a powerful social and cultural statement about the oppression, subjugation and abbreviation of the rights and freedoms of vulnerable and minority categories like girls and women.

The Urhobo are the offspring of King Solomon who had three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines. Gordons sarcastically observes that it would have taken Solomon one thousand days to sleep with each of the women daily before repeating the cycle. The Urhobo man has a retinue of wives and innumerable children and so is similar to Solomon because of his predilection for a large family size. The Yoruba come from the biblical Joseph who emerged from prison to the premiership in ancient Egypt. Joseph was sold into slavery by his envious and treacherous brothers but ended up as prime minister after his imprisonment. In Nigeria's political history, the Yoruba are the ethnicity with the singular fortune of coming out of prison to positions of prominence in government. The first was Obafemi Awolowo, a first and second republic politician who was released from prison for treasonable felony and named finance minister/prime minister by military head of state, General Yakubu Gowon in 1967. The second was military head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo (1976 – 1979) who was later imprisoned by General Sani Abacha for a failed coup plot. When he was released after

the sudden death of Abacha, Obasanjo was elected president and served two terms (1999 – 2003; 2003 – 2007). Both men are of Yoruba ethnicity.

In another performance with marked resonances bordering on ethno-cultural representation, Gordons implicates the Bini people in Edo State. The Bini are also renowned in “African science” and are believed to be fetishistic and superstitious. One area in which they have demonstrated their ingenuity is witchcraft through the invention of magical airplanes they fly at night. Witchcraft is the supra-normal practice of applying magic and sorcery in order to supernaturally control the forces of nature for benevolent or malevolent purposes (Offiong 63; Offiong 22; Frazer 184). Gordons explains in pidgin English, a language of convenience and popular expression in Nigeria widely used by comics:

I don dey tell Oyibo people
 Make dey no pose for us;
 Before they invented aeroplane
 We Africans don dey fly.
 What’s the difference
 Between aircraft and witchcraft?
 All of them no be craft?
 Dey no dey fly?
 Na where you land naim matter.
 Some dey land for barbed wire
 Some dey land for zinc
 Some dey land for people home
 But we are all landing.
 It took Bini people 300 years
 To get one small airport
 You know why?
 Everybody be pilot.
 Bedroom na tarmac...
 Dis one na joke we dey.
 Make you no come waylay me o!
 (Comedy Klinik 1).

Gordons re-enacts the stereotypical representation of the Bini people as a cultural group deeply involved in magic, sorcery and witchcraft. One form of their immersion in witchcraft is through the invention of aeroplanes with which they fly in the night. He proceeds to caution Western science and White people that invented the aeroplane about their arrogance regarding aeronautic engineering since the Bini have been experts in aviation technology from time immemorial. Interestingly, B. T. Maduwuko asserts that, “before the arrival of white magic, the African has been engaged in magic and witchcraft but in a more primitive and traditional way” (656). This explains why it took them three centuries to have a modern airport in Benin City. In an intriguing manner, he posits that every Bini-born person is a spiritual pilot who flies airplanes in the night. Curiously he concludes that there is no difference between aircraft and witchcraft because in both, “craft” is involved. The difference only inheres in the landing process. Bini airplanes land on barbed wires, roofs of zinc houses and in people’s homes. Bedrooms are the tarmacs for the witchcraft aircraft.

In this performance Gordons re-enacts what the popular imagination Nigeria is already familiar with. This is the fact that it is possible to metaphysically manipulate spirit forces which will become airplanes that people can fly in the night. While to the positivistic mind this may be difficult to contemplate, Africans especially the Bini have developed that intangible science which enables them to travel aerially at night. What is fascinating about this performance is that as Gordons is ending the episode, he implores the Bini people in the audience not to waylay him using witchcraft as he is merely cracking a joke to raise money for his needs including the school fees of his children. Again, through the instrumentality of humor, the comic artistically accomplishes one

important thing: to comment powerfully on ethno-cultural constructions in Nigeria as they circulate in the popular imagination and official media too.

Other comedians are also involved in the artistic construction and inscription of ethno-cultural and national identities through the focal lens of stand-up comedy. I Go Dye (Francis Agoda) is one such comic who is suave and skillful in accomplishing this. I Go Dye is so-called because of his pidginized manner of punctuating his performances with the phrase which loosely translates into “I Want to Die”. This stage-name touches on the power of intense laughter that his artistic virtuosity evokes which is capable of “killing” his audiences. He is of Itsekiri ethnic minority stock in Nigeria’s Niger Delta. In one of his performances, he tries to establish the convoluted link between traditional costumes and statesmanship.

Self-reflexive sensibilities about the definition, value, and effects of different semiotic systems have impact on the significations intended by the users (Stasch 168). This is true when dealing with traditional customs and their symbolic values. According to I Go Dye, former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan (2010 – 2015), an ethnic Ijaw from the Niger Delta, turned tradition on its head when he wore the Ijaw traditional dress with a Hausa-Fulani cap on his head. The comedian observes that this was an abomination as never before in the history of the Ijaw ethnic-nationality had a man desecrated tradition by wearing Ijaw robes and putting on a Hausa cap.

For President Jonathan, this apparent show of statesmanship by identifying with other ethnicities in his sartorial elegance represented confusion and the beginning of his slide into political disaster. That was why he lost his bearing in office and inevitably lost the next election, I Go Dye avers. It is notoriously difficult to establish a logical link between a man’s dress code and his political performance/partisan fortunes. But I Go Dye persuasively argues that President Jonathan was overzealous in pandering to the interests of others while denying his Ijawness, thereby losing his authentic cultural self. This cultural confusion symbolically translated into political confusion.

Sometimes, this representation of ethno-cultural purity and sanctity can compel the recuperation or retrieval of whole cultural histories or social practices for the purpose of consolidating cultural solidarity, longing and belonging. For President Jonathan, imperatives of ethno-cultural authenticity and sovereignty should compel him to dress like an ethnic Ijaw and not complicate or even adulterate his ethnic identity. Putting on a Hausa cap negates or erases that concrete identity. This is tantamount to abomination. In the estimation of I Go Dye, the moment President Jonathan failed to conform to these normative ethno-cultural expectations, confusion of a different nature began to define his presidency. Cultural confusion translated to political confusion and this culminated in tensions to his rising political trajectory. In all this, what remains important is how stand-ups can insert informed and powerful commentaries whose resonances can be felt in the domains of national culture and politics.

It is not only Nigerian ethnicities and their cultural identities/sovereignities that have constituted representational sites for stand-up comics. Nigeria as a nation-state in a state of becoming has also been a target for the critical barbs of these purveyors of the comic art form. In their creative attempts to poke humor at Nigeria and register their outrage and grievances, the comics sometimes distill commentaries that playfully tease their nation. However, beneath the topsoil of the humor/laughter is buried concentrated denunciatory and condemnatory criticism of a nation blessed by providence and so cursed by its political elite. Gordons begins by praising Nigeria:

Ladies and gentlemen
 I love my country
 There is no country on
 The surface of the earth
 That I’ll rather come from.
 Naija is the best country
 In the whole wide world.

He continues by berating foreign media organizations like Cable News Network (CNN), an American cable/satellite television station thus:

Forget all the things that
 CNN dey talk, they dey try
 To paint us black
 Everything wey dey bad na black:
 Black maria, black Friday
 Black book... black sheep
 E no concern us: we don black
 We don black. Put all the colors
 Of this world dey go give
 You black. We be original...
 So forget the ting wey America
 Dey do...America don dey reach
 Menopause...we are doing things
 Americans cannot do.

Then Gordons offers this scathing criticism of Nigeria:

Nigerians we give beneficially,
 Benevolently, sacrificially...
 Nigeria na the only country wey
 Give another country light
 And e no get. For this country
 Nobody go arrest you say
 Your generator dey disturb am.
 Even if you go call police
 They go talk say you sef
 Make u go buy your generator
 Take am face him window ...
 In this country you fit dey
 Prison win election (laughter).
 In this country full ship,
 Full two ship lost and
 We are still looking for it.
 Full aeroplane lost: i no
 Crash i no land; we no see
 Pilot, we no see pilottee
 No cabin crew, no report
 And the ministry is moving...
 (*Gordons Comedy Klinik Ward 1*)

It is significant that the comedian in the introit begins with an emotional connection with the audience. Then in a sarcastic and sardonic tone, he praises Nigeria (Naija) as the most generous, benevolent and beneficent nation in the world. Panegyric singing is an organic part of the oral performance arts where individuals who are patrons are sometimes extolled and deified but also excoriated and demonized. What is, however, fascinating in this case is that the exultant tone of the language of lavish commendation soon pales into scurrilous accents of attack. The artist enumerates a catalogue of disquieting and humiliating events which suggest decidedly that the preceding praise-singing was merely a prologue to prepare his audience for the lurid details of Nigeria's embarrassing failures as a nation-state.

Sciama defines humor as “mood, temper, feeling”, and “a message whose ingenuity or verbal skill or incongruity has the power to evoke laughter” (2). It is inexplicable that a country can provide energy to a neighboring country while it is perennially engulfed in darkness. Such a country is truly unique in its paradoxical existence. Every Nigerian citizen is deeply aware of the epileptic public power supply

which has caused personal discomfort and developmental arrest for the country. Poverty levels and the collapse of public infrastructure are also partly attributable to the legendary deficit in energy. Yet Nigeria supplies the energy it lacks to countries like Republic of Benin and Republic of Niger.

It is the non-availability of power that drives Nigerian citizens into purchasing generators and other alternative independent sources of energy for their domestic and commercial consumption. This has led to unprecedented noise and environmental pollution which the comic complains about. The largely dysfunctional police force will only encourage citizens to buy their generators if they feel assaulted by the noise from the generating sets of their neighbors. This has in turn resulted in the competition for generators in the “I-better-pass-my-neighbor” phenomenon.

It is also true that an airplane disappeared in Nigeria’s airspace and it has never been found several years after. The plane did not crash or land. In the same token, two ships laden with crude oil also went missing and nothing has been heard about them since then. It is also in Nigeria that a politician won an election while in prison. Against the backdrop of the comic introducing these national disasters with an elaborate praise of Nigeria as the most generous and best country on earth, one can understand the humor that was intended through the opening effusive celebration and deification of the country. The American dimension to the discourse introduces oppositional binaries based on racial grounds (which CNN and the Western media unfairly represent) interpellating Africans as black. In the end, the comic suggests that Nigeria is also implicated in these media mis/representations through its odious national engineering processes. The use of “menopause” to characterize America suggests stagnation, stasis and declining productivity.

There is also the dimension of the individuation of ethnicity and cultural ontology when a so-called celebrity is expected to embody the culture and function as its repository. This introduces a synecdochic element to comedy where a part validly represents the whole. These individuals who belong to the public domain are perceived as representing their ethnicities and cultures even when they do this negatively. Gordons attacks other artists using the ethno-cultural rubric. One of them is Tuface, a musical artist:

I get something wey de fit person
 Stick to what works for you
 Chain e no dey fit goat; but e dey
 Fit dog; rope no fit dog, but e dey
 Fit goat.
 How dey go talk say make Tuface
 Come dvertise for contraceptive?
 I dey wear am? For where?
 People like Tuface suppose
 To dvertise for baby pears, pampers
 Towel and other things that can
 Increase the ministry. That is his calling
 (*Gordons Comedy Klinik Ward 1*)

Geoff King identifies two types of comedy: comedy in the sense of laughter, anarchy and disruption of harmony, and comedy in the sense of a movement towards harmony, integration (8). The natural association between goats and ropes and dogs and chains is harmonic and prepares the audience for the playful attack on Tuface who is a playboy with several children from many women out of wedlock. However, the choice of Tuface for advertisement on contraceptives represents a disruption of that harmony because of Tuface’s reckless and irresponsible sexual behavior. What is significant here is that Tuface is seen as representing his ethnicity or cultural group. In a country with an HIV/AIDS prevalent rate considered as pandemic, the Idoma ethnicity/culture that Tuface comes from is one of the areas worst affected by the scourge. If the reflection on

an aesthetic experience is always an important – perhaps the most important – element of how it becomes important to us (White 78) is valid, then the experience of the knowing audience about what happens in real life is telling regarding the association between Tuface, sexual promiscuity and HIV/AIDS.

It is also in the representation of public figures and their ethno-cultural affiliations that stand-ups demonstrate their essential humor. They share this quality with cartoons. This is the vulgarization and exaggerated presentation of public figures often in a negative and negating perspective. Yet these artists escape censorship, censure or punishment. Many Nigerian stand-up comics, notably Gordons and I Go Dye, normally enter conciliatory comments like: “Na joke,” “no take am serious o,” and “guys dey hustle so that they can pay school fees,” to emphasize the playfulness of their art despite the censorious edge and harshness of the jokes.

Conclusion

Beyond the received knowledge of stand-ups as generators of laughter and humor, it is clear from the above discussion that this popular art form also inserts or embeds in its constitutive structures signifying codes whose multi-layered meanings navigate Nigeria’s ethno-cultural imaginary. There is, therefore, an obvious logic of laughter/humor to stand-ups which animates them and appeals to the psychology and cognitive appreciation of audiences. However, the social functionality of stand-ups ramifies beyond the laughable/humorous. Stand-ups function precisely in the fabrication of serious commentary which powerfully and relentlessly engages the contradictions and pathologies of the human condition in private and public domains.

Through their professional acumen and competencies, it can be argued that Nigerian comedians have sufficiently demonstrated how the art of stand-ups can be mobilized to distill bold and eloquent statements of a social, political and ethno-cultural nature through the instrumentality of laughter/humor. The comics can be perceived as post/modern tricksters as they have slipped into the roles performed by Hare, Tortoise, Spider, Fox, etc. in African oratures. They, therefore, perform a social function similar to that of these clever and humorous animals in folktales and fables: entertain but also instruct society concerning normative codes and social conventions. There is, therefore, an activist and interventionist strain to the role of comedians in Nigeria’s socio-cultural and political space.

Nigerian stand-up comedy is a popular cultural infrastructure which seeks to rigorously interrogate and undermine the architecture of high culture, orthodoxy and officialdom. This is why stand-up comedians are quite often engaged in the subversive and transgressive strategies of playfully registering rebellion against hegemonic tendencies. Inscribed in their light-hearted performances is a whole regime of angry rhetoric which speaks back with disguised violence and a corrective vision mobilizing the weapon of humor. Stand-up comedians are *homo narrens* (narrative beings) but also succeed in making their audiences *homo ridens*, creatures who laugh.

Inherent in laughter is a dichotomous schema which inserts deeper psychological insights or awareness of the aesthetic and symbolic potential of humor. This dual or binary framing of humor/laughter institutes a melodramatic temperament to it but also acquires a sinister and serious quality with functional and subversive energies which undermine hegemonic institutional practices. Implicated in this duality are the categories of ambiguity, ambivalence, incongruity and paradox. This makes laughter a double-edged sword which cuts both ways (Meyer 2000, 311). It also raises the fundamental philosophical question about appearance and reality.

Today in Nigeria and elsewhere, print/scribal cultures have assured this popular art form of an enlarged life and propitious future. This is because much of it has been reduced to writing and the printed word. With digital modernity, it is fascinating how the

travelling habits of stand-up comedy as an oral performance event have improved its fortunes. It now occupies an alternative, viable space in the digital ecosystem through platforms such as CDs, DVDs, television, you tube and the internet. Thus, an essential oral art has acquired the traits of digimodernity which enables it greater space and leverage more than ever before to *perform* laughter/humor and to *represent* ethno-cultures in Nigeria.

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