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Representations of the Nigerian Police and Policing in Stand-up Comedy: Tracking Embedded Meanings and Implications

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Different art forms have been employed in engaging and resisting injustices across Africa and beyond. Stand-up comedy has emerged as one genre of popular arts for critiquing social malaise such as insecurity, bribery, and police corruption in Nigeria. Through an analysis of selected stand-up comedy performances by Nigerian comedians—Seyi Law, Okey Bakassi, Gina Yashere, and I Go Dye—this research shows how popular artistes frame police and policing in Nigeria, and what this means for ordinary citizens who encounter the police. I explore how the content and context of performed jokes convey diverse emotions and messages, and argue that stand-up comedy, as well as other humour-based cultural expressions, produce imbricating social meanings that both challenge and condone societal injustices in Nigeria.

Keywords: Stand-up comedy, Humour, Police, #EndSARS, Resistance, Nigeria

Introduction

Most scientific articles on humour begin with an allusion to the universality and ubiquity of the phenomenon across human societies. Humour as a subject of inquiry has attracted cross-disciplinary attention from several fields including psychology, linguistics, political science, history, neurology, computer science, and more recently, international relations. It has been theorised as a form of linguistic expression that conveys simple and complex signs and messages from one body to another (Attardo 1994; Attardo 2000). As an art form, humour has been studied as a creative-cum-systematic process or product that serves to amuse and entertain (Dynel 2009). Scholars have also studied the therapeutic value of humour and laughter (see Mora-Ripoll 2010). There is consensus that humour and laughter

are created, reproduced, and consumed, intentionally and otherwise, in interactions within and between individuals, groups, and cultures. Correspondingly, humour has been situated within multiple conceptual discourses including postcolonialism and subalternity (Seirlis 2011; Obadare 2010; Källstig and Death 2020). In congruence with the bourgeoning literature that positions humour as a tool for counter-hegemony, Obadare (2010:94) opines that "humour serves both personal and political purposes", arguing that on a personal level, humour gives solace to the marginalised, helping them to deal with everyday experiences of oppression, while on a political level, it is wielded to engage the harsh realities of society, as well as to subvert hegemonic forces. It is in line with this argument that this study emanates to investigate the place of humour, particularly stand-up comedy, in Nigeria, a society plagued with complex political and economic ills. In this article, I examine the content and performance of stand-up comedy acts in Nigeria, and argue that the genre, as well as other humour-based popular cultural expressions produce imbricating social meanings that both challenge and condone societal injustices in Nigeria. This is particularly so in the last two decades as I shall demonstrate in this paper.

Since the beginning of this century, the entertainment industry in Nigeria has blossomed into a socio-cultural force that has inspired other parallels in other African countries especially Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. Springing off from traditional African artistic expressions and semi-established colonial institutions, the entertainment industry was aided by the cultural exchange engendered by an expanding neoliberal world economy. From the early 1990s, Nollywood, Nigeria's movie industry, burgeoned in production and spread in distribution across the African continent and beyond. Its beauty lay in its tendency towards improvisation and in the often-relatable manner in which the African condition was dramatized. Artistes such as Genevieve Nnaji, Omotola Jalade Ekeinde, Ramsey Noah, and Chinedu Ikedieze and Osita Iheme (popularly known as Aki and Pawpaw) became transnational sensations. At the same time, the Nigerian music industry was taking centre stage in Africa. Nigerian highlife, hip-hop, gospel, rock-and-blues, fuji music, and other genres turned local musicians into international celebrities overnight. It is in the context of this boom, premised perhaps on a growing economy and middle class, that the Nigerian comedy industry metamorphosed into the massive enterprise that it is today. Anchored in related sectors within the entertainment industry, comedy show promoters could organise high-priced mega-events in Nigeria and abroad. Stand-up comedy quickly became mainstreamed such that the services of stand-up comedians were sought in cross-sectional events and shows, marriage ceremonies, churches, and political rallies. Crucial to the popularisation of stand-up comedy in Nigeria was the live performance event "Night of a Thousand Laughs" — a set of shows organised by entertainment merchant Opa Williams across major cities, first in Nigeria, then internationally (Ayakaroma 2013). These shows were copied onto VCR tapes, CDs, and DVDs, and distributed worldwide. Featured comedians used a mix of English, Nigerian Pidgin, and popular slangs to transmit relatable and familiar ideas to elicit laughter from an audience in real-time.

Today, different performances are incorporated into stand-up stage routines, including melodrama, feigned drunkenness, extemporaneous singing, tremendously exaggerated expressions, and dancing. Among the most popular acts in the industry today are Ali Baba (Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome), AY (Ayo Makun), Basket Mouth (Bright Okpocha), Akpororo (Jephthah Bowoto), Kenny Black (Otolorin Kehinde Peter), I Go Dye (Francis Agoda), Okey Bakassi (Okechukwu Onyegbule), Seyi Law (Lawrence Aletile), Gordons (Godwin Komone), Helen Paul, ChiGul (Chioma Omeruah), and Warri Pikin (Anita Alaire Afoke Asuoha)—the last three being among the few established women in this community. It is worth noting that the stand-up comedy enterprise in Nigeria is significantly gendered, with mostly men dominating the scenes. This is particularly problematic as the underrepresentation of women, gender-nonconforming, and LGBTIQ comedians results in the eclipsing of diverse perspectives. Ayakaroma (2013) notes that

since the Nigerian stand-up comedy scene is seen as a man's world, the few women in the industry must work extra hard amid discrimination to secure a place for themselves. Arguably, the growth of digital technology, and the emergence of a parallel sub-genre known as internet comedy (or social-media-comedy), has fostered more inclusiveness in media and entertainment in Nigeria. Some of the most celebrated social media comedians in the country who primarily use YouTube, Instagram, and Tiktok to share content to millions of followers are women. They include: Maraji (Gloria Olorontobi), Taaooma (Apaokagi Adedoyin Maryam), Emmanuella Samuel (Star of Mark Angel Comedy), among a few. Each of these women, who are changing the narrative and confronting stereotypes with their art, has over a million followers on Instagram. This trend suggests a diffusion of power and influence, occasioned by the democratizing effect of social media.

Yet, beyond their role as entertainers, comedians have been likened to jesters in ancient traditional African societies—individuals of talent who also possessed a sort of informal license to not only comically comment on contemporary issues in society, but also to criticize wrongdoings by kings and commoners alike (Omoko 2018:2; Nwankwo 2019:101). Hence, owing to their talent, positioning, and access, comedians today are believed to have a moral obligation to engage societal issues—to speak the unspeakable. Rising to the task, therefore, African stand-up comedians often defy the strictures of censorship as they confront the failures of democracy, or the lack of it, through a kind of storytelling that evokes memories of a bitter-sweet past, revokes the distress of a postcolonial present, and invokes a much-desired better-tomorrow (see Seirlis 2011).

Nonetheless, scholars have warned against the simplistic interpretation of comedy (across societies and in various forms) as a tool utilized for subversion by civil society—particularly the oppressed. Resistance and compliance are often not clearly distinct; actors play ambiguous roles; and comedy assists the powerful as it does the oppressed (Mason 2010; Obadare 2010; Källstig and Death 2020). Similarly, being an enterprise fully enmeshed in the capitalist system, stand-up comedy in Nigeria is subject to state regulation, and monetary influence. It is on this note that I interrogate the role and effects of stand-up comedy (and comedians) in an alternative public sphere in Nigeria today. I ask: In an age defined by deviance and resistance to the status quo, how does comedy represent, challenge, reify, and reproduce the social malaise characteristic of the Nigerian society?

Through an analysis of selected stand-up comedy performances by A-list Nigerian comedians—Seyi Law, Gina Yashere, Okey Bakassi, and I Go Dye – this research shows how artistes frame police and policing in Nigeria, and what it means for ordinary citizens who encounter the police.

The study is inspired by the recent wave of protests against endemic violence and institutionalized corruption of the Nigeria police which began in early October 2020 (known as the EndSARS protest). Established in 1992 as a special police unit to help fight violent crimes in the country, SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) became a nuisance and terror to Nigerians, especially young people. The officers of the unit have been accused of engaging in arbitrary arrests, extortions, and extrajudicial killings (Ekoh and George 2021). Earlier, in late 2017, Nigerians took to the streets to demand an end to the rogue police unit. Successful as the protests were in raising awareness, it can be argued that the policing structure in the country was largely unshaken. For at least 4 years, there have been series of protests—online and offline—against the excesses of SARS, and the police in general, but the government has always responded with indifference, violence, or duplicity—refusing to deal with the matter squarely. In fact, to pacify protesters, the Nigerian government had claimed to have disbanded SARS many times over the years, but the unit's continued operation and wanton abuses demonstrated that the state has no regard for the peoples' demands, nor is it committed to the security of ordinary citizens. #EndSARS, as a hashtag used among Nigerians to condemn police violence, lives on—predominantly on social media platforms, heightening each time a case of police brutality goes viral. The wave of protests that erupted in October 2020 was triggered by a viral video showing a

police officer accosting a motorist, shooting him, pushing him out of his vehicle and speeding off in his car. The episode looked like a robbery scene, only more casual, and of course carried out by SARS officers who are meant to protect citizens. Within hours of its appearance on the internet, other similar videos followed. One showed police officers dragging a man out of a hotel and shooting him at close range, amid pleas for mercy. Concurrently flooding the Nigerian social media space were testimonies by victims of police brutality, or their friends and families in cases where the victims did not live long enough to tell their own stories. Among others, the case of Ifeoma Abugu, a 28-year-old woman who was allegedly detained, drugged, raped, and killed by SARS officers inspired outrage.

The Nigerian state still suffers a major hangover from its history of military dictatorship—an era that saw a brazen clamp down on dissidents, among other premeditated acts of state violence (Olukotun 2002). The fact that SARS was established during this regime is suggestive of its mode of operation and (lack of) principles. Fed up with the impunity of this rogue police unit, Nigerians, at home and abroad, took to the streets to decry the harassment that they had endured from the police for too long. However, Nigerians have always expressed their opinions on national issues including police corruption through artistic and creative forms such as music, film, drama, social media memes, and stand-up comedy. Adopting these less combative forms of dissent, ordinary people are able to criticise the government and societal ills more freely, while minimizing the risk of violent reprisal from the state and state sanctioned actors. On the one hand, the popular depiction of the Nigerian police as incompetent and unscrupulous helped normalise and perpetuate the culture of corruption within the force and might have also delayed full-blown resistance. On the other hand, the engagement of these socio-political issues on social media and television generated the public dissent that precipitated the October 2020 protests. I show here how comedians navigate issues of censorship by creatively utilising overstatements, gestures, and context as commentary and confrontation. My paper concludes that stand-up comedy, as well as other humoristic cultural expressions, produce varying social meanings and effects ranging from outright resistance, ridicule, critique, assertation of tolerance, to resignation to fate. These effects are not necessarily contradictory.

The Representation of Nigerian Police in Stand-up Comedy

Whilst comedians utilise their platforms to engage social injustices, their commentaries often create multiple meanings which consequently produces complex effects. The mere engagement of these issues by comedians should not be simplistically termed resistance and the ambivalence in the comedians' materials should not be ignored or taken lightly. It is worthwhile to bear in mind that because entertainment, and resultantly, profit-making, is the ultimate goal of the Nigerian stand-up comedy establishment, social critique and transgression can mostly be accommodated within permissible boundaries of the industry's unwritten code. Also, comedians and their jokes shape and are shaped by societal ideologies which are subject to spatial and temporal factors (Filani and Ajayi 2019). Therefore, in studying the utility and effect of humour in society, particularly stand-up comedy in Nigeria, it is necessary to individuate these performances and materials, zooming in the analytical lens on existing intricacies while underscoring the sub-genres to which they belong including the category I identify as "police jokes" in this paper.

"Police jokes" are a staple of Nigerian comedy. Through multifarious vocal and theatrical expressions, comedians create humorous representations of the police and law enforcement in the country. In their jokes, the police are clueless yet fantastically corrupt; they are violent, but open to negotiation; they are manipulative, and can be manipulated;

they exemplify some of the ills that characterise the Nigerian society, yet they embody authority. The question then arises: How should scholars understand these kinds of jokes created and performed by professional comics whose primary mandate is to entertain? How can one measure the efficacy and potency of jokes motivated by political and social ills? Are these jokes purposefully deployed to perform strategic functions in the first place? Through the case studies below, I show the various ways stand-up comedians imagine and represent policing and law enforcement in a neoliberal world order. Employing mimicry and mockery, hyperbole and euphemism, overstatements and dramatization, these comedians reproduce popular perceptions of the Nigerian police. Their outputs can be viewed as an indictment of oppressive systems as well as a passive assertion of reality, depending on what is said and how it is communicated. Admittedly, female police officers are not featured in the comedic performances analysed in this paper. This does not mean that there are no female police officers in the country. However, it is a general presumption that policing is a man's job—an assumption that has produced what Yalley and Olutayo (2020) term "the masculinised policing culture of Nigeria". In the jokes, as in reality, police officers are mostly men, but their influence is felt across all genders. In going through the comedic routines, it is therefore important to bear in mind the gendered nature of the country's policing system as well as its patriarchal structure.

In examining comic materials then, the context of the joke and the context in the joke should be carefully reviewed (Filani 2015). Additionally, materials should be examined independently, unravelling the context, and also focusing on both the joke and the performances (dramatizations and gestures). Ultimately, as every performer has an on-screen and off-screen persona, scholars must put the personality of the joke performer into consideration when analysing their material. Relatedly, a study by Ojaide and Ojaruega (2020) shows that comedians who are associated with Warri—an oil rich city with mostly poor inhabitants in Nigeria's Niger Delta region—perform a unique style of comedy premised on "a confluence of factors that include Warri's history, the sociocultural background of its inhabitants, pidgin English and its associated banter, and, above all, the peculiar poverty or other personal experiences the comedians endured growing up in a supposedly oil-rich city (91)". What follows are four case studies which are comedic routines featuring the Nigerian police. It is pertinent to note that even though many of these jokes were told/performed in Nigerian Pidgin English, I have translated them to British English for wider accessibility and analytic purposes[1]. All shows were retrieved from YouTube. The inclusion criteria used for selection is that each comedian elaborately replayed jokes about the police.

Police is Your Friend (Okey Bakassi at Glo Laffta Fest 2015)

Glo Laffta Fest is an annual mega comedy show hosted across Nigerian urban centres. Typically, it attracts a large audience which includes prominent persons, such as corporate heads, entertainers, and everyday citizens. Sponsored by Globacom, one of the largest telecommunications companies in Africa, the show usually features celebrated as well as upcoming comedians. The performing comic whose jokes are examined here, Okey Bakassi, is a renowned actor and comedian in Nigeria who has been in the limelight since the 1990s. He is regarded as one of the pioneers of stand-up comedy in Nigeria. An agricultural engineer by training, Bakassi is celebrated for his spontaneity and versatility. His on-screen persona—bold, mischievous, loquacious, and vulgar—often rubs off on his jokes. Recently, he released an autobiography entitled *The Memoirs of an African Comedian* (2019). He also once held an appointed position in politics, working as a special adviser to

[1] I recognize that in translating the original Nigerian pidgin into British English, we lose the nuances and contours of the original expressions and meanings associated with the cultural specificities of everyday life in Nigeria.

a sitting governor on entertainment matters. The fact that he once identified with the government may be perceived as problematic when juxtaposed with his often-subversive comedic content. Okey Bakassi's comedy touches on multiple themes ranging from politics, everyday gender relations, generational transition, xenophobia, colonialism, to sex. In this performance, the joke began thus:

> I said I must tell a joke about the Nigerian police. When I go overseas for shows, I usually tell people that the Nigerian police is the friendliest in the world. Seriously, you all should clap for them (audience claps amid laughter). When they say police is your friend, the Nigerian police is the real friend.

Okey Bakassi begins by making a rather ironic submission. Irony and sarcasm, like most jokes, are inferential and contextual. According to Attardo (2000:814), "the reconstruction of the ironist's intended meaning is supposed to be based on a set of shared presuppositions". Here, the comic banks on his audiences' knowledge of the workings of institutions in the society as well as their knowledge of his style to predict where he is going with the joke. "The Police Is Your Friend" is a popular Nigerian slogan developed to improve the public image of the police and increase citizens' trust in the force. However, this slogan has been used sarcastically in songs, movies, comedy skits, and articles when discussing the wrongdoings of the Nigerian police. By proclaiming that they are the friendliest in the world, and asking the audience to celebrate them, Okey Bakassi invites the public to participate in a kind of collective mockery that is as performative as it is mischievous. He physicalizes diverse emotions through facial expressions and body language that are at once exaggerative and unembellished. The inherent theatricality of stand-up comedy accommodates ambiguity which in turn adorns criticism in figurative expressions. In his seminal work, Ayakaroma (2013) shows how stand-up comedy emerged as an entertainment genre and a profitable business despite the deplorable state of professional theatre in Nigeria. He argues that like theatre, stand-up comedy can serve as a mode of direct engagement between entertainers and audience. Furthermore, in addition to its utility as a source of relief in the face of suffering and frustration, stand-up comedy can serve as a vehicle for the conveyance of criticism or social commentary. This is the path Okey Bakassi toes as he passes his message to a knowing audience.

He continues:

> Elsewhere, when you hang out with your friends, they refuse to drink if they have to drive home. When asked why, they tell you that the police will stop them, and possibly charge them with driving under influence – a serious offense that could lead to a jail term or the confiscation of one's driving license.
>
> (Okey Bakassi exclaims in disbelief) So the Nigerian police will leave the problems of 170 million people including Boko Haram, kidnapping, and armed robbery, to smell the mouths of drivers to determine who is drunk? Are they that idle? Truly, I wonder if these other countries have no real problems.

There are a few points to be drawn from the above extract. First, the comic made use of analogies and references to drive home his point. Ironical or sarcastic comparisons are often used pragmatically in jokes to achieve various purposes. For one, irony is used by comedians to convey their evaluation of a condition or event, and this evaluation could be either negative or positive (Attardo 2000; Dynel 2009). Okey Bakassi paints the picture of an overly organised Western society where restrictions to individual freedom are needlessly strict. He trivialises the criminalisation of drinking while intoxicated, mocks the Preliminary Breath Test, and attributes this excessive surveillance to a lack of real problems in their society. In his joke, Nigeria is projected as a nation too preoccupied with real problems to be bothered by frivolities, yet stuck in a world order with colonial structures such as its current law enforcement establishment that only allows for such comparisons. His material can be read not just as a mockery of an inept police force but also as a brutal critique of

the postcolonial situation. At the same time, his joke is a subtle commendation of a dynamic world where improvisation reigns supreme and the apparatuses of rigidity are tossed through the window. He concludes his joke thus:

> In Nigeria, when you are coming back from the club late at night, with a bottle of Hennessey tucked under your seat, your music blaring and you encounter the police, you are usually the one to tell them that you are intoxicated. They will then shower you with praises and ask for money or gifts. You will probably retrieve the bottle under your seat, take a final sip and hand it over to them, in addition to some money for cigarettes. They will hail you passionately in appreciation for your kind gesture and bid you farewell. They are very friendly indeed.

In performing this scene, Okey Bakassi reproduces popular Nigerian police tropes, creating meanings that range from non-commitment to the business of law and security, and to feigned loyalty aimed at extorting money from the citizen. Institutionalised bribery is perhaps the foremost characteristic ascribed to the Nigerian police. It is very relatable and often exploited creatively by comedians to elicit mirth from the audience. Nonetheless, the concept of giving and taking bribes does not represent a single entity in the Nigerian imaginary. Its various forms are so interwoven into the everydayness of people's existence that Christianised versions of the same concept are largely condoned in the society. Indeed, a significant part of being Nigerian is to lament and condemn corruption at every given opportunity, yet participate frequently in it (Smith 2007). Therefore, when Okey Bakassi spoke about the police asking for money or gifts, the audience did not simply understand this as an immoral request for a bribe but as an unsurprising performance of Nigerianness; a debt everyone owes to everyone—undesirable, unavoidable, yet thankfully open to constant negotiations. The negotiation he speaks of is neither completely embraced nor simply rejected, but rather it is a portraiture of reality in its starkness. One would then wonder the implication or effect of such representation especially concerning the discussion on resistance, critique, and social change. In as much as stand-up comedians give life to pressing social issues by presenting them humorously, their messages may dabble between mere representation for the sake of it, resignation to the current situation, and criticism. Okey Bakassi's jokes, steeped in sarcasm and enveloped in his persona, alludes to the already well-known rot in the country's policing system. At the same time, it affirms the necessity of the flexibility in the system it fosters.

CSI – Cannot Solve It (Gina Yashere)

Gina Obedapo Iyashere (stage name Gina Yashere) is a British-Nigerian comedian, actor, voice artist and TV show host. Prior to breaking into the British and American entertainment industries in the mid-nineties, Yashere worked as an elevator engineer in the UK. She often talks about her upbringing, and the time she worked as an engineer and lift operator. Whether on stage or in movies, Yashere exhibits a sharp-witted character, playing on stereotypes and using emphasis to elicit humour. From 2004-2005, she gained much popularity by playing Mrs. Omokorede—a bossy, pushy Nigerian mum who wants the best for herself and her child in the Henry Lenny comedy sketch show. Yashere played a similar role in the American sit-com Bob Hearts Abishola, starring as the protagonist Abishola's talkative friend and co-worker, Kemi. Her style of stand-up comedy which heavily relies on dramatization to pass the jokes is a stark evidence of her successful acting career.

Gina Yashere takes pride in being the first British comedian to ever appear on the Def Comedy Jam. This is particularly significant given the low representation of women in stand-up comedy all over the world. In a male-dominated industry that rewards witticism and aggressiveness, women are often relegated to the margins by men to avoid competition and adulteration. Indeed, women stand-up comedians are afforded less opportunities compared to their men counterpart, and are more likely to be criticized and heckled for telling the same kind of jokes that men comedians easily get praised for (Nilsen and Nilsen

2000; Lockyer 2011). Oftentimes, men comedians perform degrading jokes (targeting the female body) associated with women's sexuality (Parker 2002). However, women comedians are beginning to "reclaim the female body" and challenge patriarchal systems in the comedyscape (Tomsett 2018). As a queer black woman, Gina Yashere faces multiple obstacles both in her career and in her personal life. In one of her performances, she described to the audience the intense difficulty of disclosing her sexuality to her African mother. By creatively employing humour to engage various forms of injustices experienced by women, black and queer people around the world, Yashere has established herself as a popular advocate for the oppressed.

In addition to playing stereotypical African characters in movies and TV shows, another way Yashere keeps in touch, and indeed celebrates her Nigerian roots is by featuring Nigerian issues in her comedy routines. One of her favourites which she has performed across the world is about the Nigerian police. She remarked:

> (Referring to Nigeria). "… scary place!! If you commit a murder in Nigeria, you will get away with it. And I will tell you why. In Nigeria we don't have CSI (Crime Scene Investigation). If we did, it stands for, Cannot Solve It (pauses as audience roars in laughter). The only way you get caught when you commit a murder is if you are standing over the body saying, "I did it".

Despite having been born and raised in the UK, Yashere's frequently identifies with Nigeria. Yet, she does not hesitate to ridicule its flawed systems. This can be likened to how Africans in the diaspora, often mediated by digital media, negotiate identity and belonging through transnational interventions. The heavy diaspora involvement in the #EndSARS protests of October 2020 both online and offline comes to mind. Yeku (2016) argues that the emergence of new technologies of engagement such as social media and internet applications affords people in an oppressive state the opportunity to represent their social anxieties creatively and cryptically, communicate their aspirations, and speak back to power. Yeku, echoing Otiono (2014) shows how the re-emergence of the traditional trickster character, "Akpos", created and transmitted in and via the digital media sphere enables the expression of individual agency and allows for a reimagination of subaltern resistance in the postcolonial world. Enabled by technology, Yashere is able to intervene in the sociopolitics of Nigeria through the stage character she created. Yet, her intervention, while hilarious, plays into many of the stereotypes of African people and institutions. Given that she performs mostly to non-African audience, it can be argued that this routine reinforces some of the misconceptions about Africans, creating what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie famously termed 'the danger of a single story'. Adichie (2009) states, "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

Yashere continues:

> The police in Nigeria turns up for a crime and they are like (she changes her accent to sound 'Nigerian') There is a dead body, (she repeats, with more vehemence and drama) there is a dead body! (She then feigns confusion and cluelessness, at the same time putting on an air of exaggerated professionality and self-importance). Somebody has been killed! (This time, she relaxes her body in a bossy yet nonchalant manner. Then, pointing to the supposed dead body on the floor, she narrows her eyes to dramatize contemplation followed by sudden realization). Did you do it? She asked, facing an imaginary person (perhaps a passerby). "No? Oh Shit!" (stamping her feet). What about you? Facing another direction. No? She then concludes, we will never catch the killer!

Gina Yashere can be likened to the popular South African comedian and host, Trevor Noah, in that they both are drawn to mocking postcolonial arrangements such as justice systems and law enforcement around the world. It is no wonder that in 2017, Yashere was announced as a contributor on The Daily Show—a platform for socio-political criticism—which Trevor Noah has been hosting since 2015. Källstig and Death (2020) in studying Trevor Noah's stand-up comedy materials on race, disease, and poverty, position his art

within contemporary postcolonial discourse on counter-oppression. Drawing on his experiences as a mixed-race child growing up in apartheid South Africa, Noah meanders between the social and political boundaries of established notions of identity. His material, as Yashere's, even though seemingly laced with contradictions, can be understood as calculated mimicry performed to mock and unsettle dominant global hegemonic ideologies.

The Clueless Police Officers and the Overarching System (Seyi Law)

Seyi Law is an A-list Nigerian stand-up comedian who has been on the country's entertainment scene for over a decade. He uses a blend of exaggerated expressions, emphasis, and manipulated intonations, and conventional rhetoric to stimulate laughter. Some of his jokes are self-denigrating while others are more explicit verbal assaults on persons or structures. His material cuts across such themes as societal values, poverty, ethnicity, religion, and survival. Additionally, he projects a witty, loud, and forceful persona. Since comedians operate within a socio-political context, it is inevitable that their art reflects their lived experiences. Seyi Law grew up in the slums of Lagos, an experience he agrees shapes his art. To grasp the nuances of his jokes, it is important to understand his style and personality. It is also pertinent to know the affective conditions encapsulating each performance. Applying discourse theory to stand-up comedy in Nigeria, Filani (2015:41) reveals that in order to unpack the sociocultural meanings embedded in stand-up jokes, one must consider "the context of the joke" and "the context in the joke". Stand-up comedians work with and within contexts that are either inflexible or dynamic but always interact and intersect with each other.

This show was performed in mid-2011, when the nation was rocked by several bombings in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, and other parts of Northern Nigeria. At the time, the infamous terrorist group, Boko Haram, was asserting its power in some parts of the country and tensions were rising. Seyi Law incorporated this concern in his joke:

> Everyone is talking about Nigeria's problems and the recent bomb blasts, blaming our police force and the inspector general of police (Changes demeanour, and pretends to be sobbing). It is not the fault of the police I can assure you. If you see the fabric used to sew their uniforms, it is enough to deprive them of all intelligence. How can a person wear all-black under this hot sun? And we all know that black radiates heat. No wonder their brains seem to be dissolved.

While performing this joke, the comedian uses feigned sympathy evidenced in his sudden cracking voice, to hyperbolize his pity for a police force so bereft of adroitness. He first draws the attention of the audience to trending problems in Nigeria, specifically the issue of bombing, before bringing the responsibility of the authorities to their imagination. Initially, he appears to be exonerating the police from their inefficiency, but the joke quickly reveals itself for what it is: masked ridicule. Obadare (2009:254) opines that Nigerians use humour as a "double-assault", that is, both to ridicule the state, and themselves. They employ the ambiguity of utterances and the context to criticise the state and its agents, but also to assert that they—all members of the society—are implicated in the nation's decay. In Seyi Law's joke, the police as an entity is ludicrous, yet there are higher forces that determine their functionality. They are victims of a larger establishment in which everyone is a participant. He uses exclamations and exaggerations to dramatize both the inappropriate conduct of officers and the pity ordinary citizens owe the force. Through a theatrical exhibition that comprised a switch in accents as well as disparaging gestures employed for mimicry, he renders the Nigerian police laughable. He continues:

> Do you know that some policemen do not know their IG (Inspector General)? Once, the IG was traveling alone and a police officer mounting a roadblock stopped him. After checking his papers and could not find any fault, the junior officer asked him for a bribe before he could let him go. The IG tried to introduce himself, implicitly, but the police officer who could still not recognise him insisted on getting the bribe. It took another officer to reveal that the man he was holding was indeed their boss.

It is important to note at this point that Seyi Law, like other Nigerian stand-up comedians, code-switches between British/American English, Nigerian Pidgin, and Yoruba. He equally uses stereotypes recognisable among people living in Nigeria (Adetunji 2013). Drawing on six episodes of "Nite of a Thousand Laugh", the popular Nigerian stand-up comedy series, Raheem (2018) examines the utilisation of humour as a tool for political activism in Nigeria. He reveals that comedians are members of the public who experience and witness social ills and oppression every day. Therefore, they deploy various linguistic and discourse strategies that stimulate laughter and amusement as they critique socio-political ills in the country. Some of these strategies include the use of pidgin as protest language, the use of exaggeration, sarcasm, the defamiliarization of popular issues, and the trivialising of serious national concerns. For instance, using an accent, Seyi Law portrayed the policeman in his story as a Northerner. Therefore, the multiple layers of his joke can be unpacked to reveal intended and hidden scripts: such as his reference to the incompetent moronic police officer, who also happens to be from the Northern part of the country. Depicted as unyielding, uneducated, unintelligent, and rascal the officer embodied some of the popular stereotypes held by southerners about northerners. By uncritically playing into stereotypes, comedians key into hegemonic discourses in society. Seyi Law's comedy can be read as a subtle mockery of the state, the police, and other enabling institutions. Simultaneously, as the comic plays into ethnic stereotypes in his routine, it can also be understood as foregrounding the very dominant ideologies it appears to confront.

Confronting Police Corruption and Brutality (I Go Dye)

Occasionally, stand-up comedians directly address social issues or agents of the state using their brand platforms. In the following extract, performed in July 2019 by the comedian I Go Dye, a confrontation drives the comedy. Before coming on stage, the comedian is informed that a high-ranking police officer, perhaps the highest in the state, is among the audience. He decides to take the opportunity to address the officer about the excesses of the police. At the time, public dissent on police conduct was already brewing with incessant online activism regarding the issue making waves.

I Go Dye is one of the most recognisable names in the Nigerian comedy scene. Raised in Warri Nigeria, he is vocal about his rise from poverty and his "street origins". Beyond comedy, he is a motivational speaker and activist. He calls himself a visionary and social crusader. He has also been known to engage in philanthropy and community development. On the stage and beyond, social critique and confrontation are not new to him. In 2018, he wrote a letter to the president asking him to relinquish power. In August 2019, I Go Dye wrote another open letter to President Muhammadu Buhari demanding the release of a journalist and political dissident, Omoyele Sowore, who was arrested by the government and charged with conspiracy to commit treason. Yet again, in October 2020, he asked the President to immediately attend to the demands of #EndSARS protesters in the heat of the unrest. His famous quote, "My brother, if you talk, you will die! If you do not talk, you still will die! So, let's talk and die!" mirrors his defiance and personality as a comedian and social critic (Ojaide and Ojaruega 2020:86)

His joke began thus:

> I have been told that a high-ranking official in the Nigerian police force is present in our midst. I was told backstage to talk about the misdeeds of the police in his hearing. You see, people will encourage you to criticise or condemn the authorities. They will make you believe that you have their support. Hence you will go ahead to unleash your fury on the dominating forces in the society. But when the authorities come after you, you will realise that you are standing alone.
>
> So, I was told to confront the officer with the truth on the people's behalf.
> (Facing the officer) "Officer look at me, it is I who is putting on a white outfit. I have absolutely nothing to say to you. I do not wish to die after delivering a message that isn't even mine.

At that moment, I Go Dye assumes different roles. He is an ordinary member of the society who has something important to tell the police therein represented by that top officer. He is also the mouthpiece of the people by virtue of possessing an elevated platform. Therefore, he has a social responsibility to speak truth to power. On a parallel plane, he is an entertainer, answerable to his funders and to the economy he operates within. Finally, but not exclusively, he is a Nigerian who must creatively use self-censorship to stay out of trouble. In telling this joke, which was apparently impromptu, I Go Dye had to devise a technique of comedy that draws on various forms of humour such as allusion, sarcasm, and teasing to deliver his message (Dynel 2009). He first projects himself as bold enough to fearlessly confront the police officer who figuratively represents higher forces, but each time he changes his mind.

> (Charges forward, while pointing at the officer) but on a serious note, the Nigerian police, please, please, please!! (withdraws, as if suddenly overtaken by fear). That would be all!
> Officer, I am saying this from the depth of my heart, the AK47 you guys carry on casual patrols on our roads and streets are not used by any other police force in the world in that same way.
>
> Your work is to protect the citizens of the country. Everyone cannot be a fraudster[2].
> Officer, listen to me, it is I who is speaking. You can do whatever you wish. Listen to me, I Go Dye is talking (then he retreats and rescinds his statement)
>
> I am not stupid. I know my fundamental human rights. Your job is to protect the citizens of this country. I am not one of those comedians that will tell you the truth and then water it down by declaring that I am joking. Let me tell you from the depths of my heart, I am joking.

This performative confrontation figuratively mirrors the precarity of resistance. It reflects the dilemma of the social commentary and public intellectualism, and the ramifications of being a social critic and a comedian at the same time. Belanger (2017) argues that when the joke is removed from the act, contemporary stand-up comedy can be read as a form of public intellectualism or social activism. Similarly, the role of stand-up comedians can be likened to the role of ancient sophists and jesters who used rhetoric to speak truth to power. However, to a large degree, social activism or public intellectualism is dangerous business in Nigeria. Humourists, particularly stand-up comedians, operate within socially constructed ethical boundaries specific to each society. The use of humour in the public domain, especially when targeted at important issues or figures, may arouse public displeasure or put the comedian in danger. Nwankwo (2019:103) asserts that "the humourist's art is complicated by the fact that every successful joke must, by definition, abuse someone or something (in)directly". In an era that rewards sensitivity in social issues such as religion, gender, ethnicity, and political affiliation, comedians must adopt self-censorship creatively without losing their art. In the past few years, many activists have

[2] Police officers in Nigeria are known to arbitrarily confront and arrests young people seen with expensive possessions, on the grounds that they could only afford those things because they are fraudsters.

been jailed or disappeared in the country[3]. Therefore, it was important for I Go Dye to assert his identity as a comedian, while explicitly speaking about the issue of police brutality/corruption in the society.

The visibly amused police officer then stands up and shakes his hands. I Go Dye jokes that his hands are like handcuffs and that he was scared for a minute that the handshake would turn to an arrest. He then continues, this time maintaining a straight face to indicate a transition from comedy to serious talk:

> You guys are doing a good job but talk to your boys. The police are out there to protect lives and property. There is a limit to harassment and oppression. The police can only harass the youth to a certain limit. It is good for the youth to have confidence in the police. The police should be the hope of the ordinary Nigerian in the face of danger. (everyone claps)
>
> I should probably stop here before the audience cheers me into trouble. Because when you send your boys after me tomorrow no one will be there to save me. And you know that the Nigerian police is good at framing people, so they can just plant a gun in my car, and it will make the news.
>
> In fact, officer please disregard everything I said today. I was joking.

Considering I Go Dye's persona and history of confrontation[4], one can hardly contest his intentions, question the motivations of his jokes, or wonder about the hidden meaning in his message. Yet, it matters to investigate the effects of such confrontations in society. Sierlis (2005) affirms that "Comedy's relationship with power and the social order is always precarious, slippery and complicated, but it provides a compelling means to understand the workings of power and the nuances of the social order" (514). In affirmation of the slippery and complicated essence of humour in society, Obadare (2012) notes that in postcolonial Africa, in the face of multiple intersecting injustices that are local, global, as well as historical, citizens resort to humour for number of reasons including as a coping mechanism and a symbolic instrument of social transgression. Yet, the key essence of humour as a social element lies in its utility as a means of socio-cultural improvisation (92). I Go Dye and his colleagues have created a thriving comedyscape in the country for socioeconomic gains, entertainment, and comic relief from the many woes of the Nigerian state. By no coincidence, this improvised space equally serves as a haven for socio-political commentary. The episode between I Go Dye and the police officer confirms that comedians possess an informal license to overtly criticise power on the stage. They often act as the mouthpiece of the people, conveying bold messages enveloped in humour.

Conclusion

This paper draws attention to the potentials of stand-up comedy as a tool for social change. As Obadare (2010) has argued, humour is paradoxically linked to social suffering in Africa. Through the production and performance of humour, the subaltern simultaneously recognize, reject, and endure social suffering (Obadare 2010: 97). In this essay, I contend that stand-up comedy in Nigeria, should be analysed within the purview of jokes often being contextual as well as utilitarian. Depending on the content and context of the joke, the performer's profile and style, as well as the audience, stand-up comedy serves as a tool for subversion, as well as an implicit assertion of condonement of the status-quo.

When the widespread #EndSARS protests against police corruption and violence broke out in 2020, many Nigeria entertainers took to their platforms to demonstrate unwavering support for the cause, and stand-up comedians were also at the forefront. In

[3] A case that comes to mind is the disappearance of Abubakar Idris Dadiyata, a lecturer and critic of the government, who was taken away by unidentified men from his home in 2019.

[4] I Go Dye is known as an open critic of Nigeria's president M. Buhari. He has written several open letters to him commenting on national issues. He also criticises politicians overtly in his comedy shows.

fact, it was these celebrities—actors, musicians, and comedians—that were at the frontlines of the activism. Amongst the notable celebrities in forefronts were Mr Macaroni (Debo Adebayo), Falz (Folarin Falana), DJ Switch (Obianuju Udeh), and Davido (David Adeleke).

Although, the comedians used for my case study in this paper were not necessarily spotlighted at the barricades of the #EndSARS protests, they have often aligned their art with the anti-police corruption campaign. This attests to the fact that Nigerian artistes are aware and committed to exercising their socio-political agency. Their involvement in the movement was neither new nor surprising, as they have always been known to engage social issues through their songs, movies, social media clips[5], and stand-up comedy stints. Regardless, these representations are heavily influenced by both colluding and intersecting internal and external factors including their sponsorship, personality, environment etc. Sometimes they inspire civil dissent towards oppressive forces, other times they cultivate discussions across social and political platforms.

[5] The popular Nigerian Rapper, Falz, who also doubles as a lawyer and activist released a song decrying police brutality/corruption as part of his 2019 Album titled *Moral Instruction*. This is just one among many songs and social media clips exploring social ills in Nigeria.

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