



# Collective Beliefs as Script Triggers: A Case Study of Gordons' Stand-up Comedy Performance

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There are several studies of humor and stand-up comedy which focus on groups of comedians in a geographical location using the Cultural Studies perspective. This study differs from such studies by concentrating on just one ace comedian in Nigeria, Gordons, using the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH). Concentrating on one stand-up comedian and applying critical discourse analysis offers the researcher the opportunity to explore the semantic script idiosyncrasies in the comedian's comical construct. This essay, therefore, reports the linguistic strategy that Gordons deploys in his performances. Specifically, this approach leverages the view that SSTH involves the cognitive processes of interactions and meaning making. For the study, Gordons' jokes were deliberately selected from some of his televised programs and from YouTube. This article argues that Gordons' idiosyncratic comical constructs are mostly hinged on religious scripts which engage the belief in salvation. It also demonstrates that humorous recounts can be processed through different script triggers, which are basically drawn from bona fide to non- bona fide speech situations. Lastly, this article shows that humor is relayed through incongruous scripts which are interpreted by the audience through shared ideologies.

**Keywords:** stand-up comedy, Gordons, semantic script, ideology, Nigeria.

## Introduction

Stand-up comedy is a genre of entertainment which comprises diverse playful rituals carried out by a comedian in front of a live audience. These comedians present themselves and their utterances in a funny manner to the audience. Schwarz (2009) describes them as “individual performers who plant themselves in front of their listeners with their microphones by telling a succession of funny stories, one-liners or short jokes, and anecdotes which are often called ‘bits’, to make their audience laugh (17).” Referring to the

comedian in a stand-up comedy as a humorist, Mintz (1985) buttresses the argument that “the humorists personality, their interaction with the audience, and their ability to spontaneously react to heckling are crucial aspects for successful stand-up comedy.”

In recent times, Nigerian stand-up comedy shows have transcended the stage and auditoriums and flourished on digital formats, such as CDs, DVDs, YouTube, and the likes. The emergence of stand-up comedy into mainstream popular entertainment in Nigeria has also positively impacted theatrical and non-theatrical activities in Nigeria. According to Taiwo (2017), dramatic sketches which help to spice up and improve on the cumulative spectacle of the comedy concert have been imbedded by a few creative and imaginative comedians in Nigeria. Gordons is one of such comedians whose comic relays have been widely accepted in Nigeria. According to Ikeru (2019), Gordons is one of the ten funniest comedians in Nigerian who won the Best Comedian of the Year in 2011, an award which was given to him by the Nigerian Entertainment Awards Organization. Gordons is known for his creativity when it comes to relaying jokes and this aspect of creativity is perceived in terms of scripts.

Aldalian (2005) opines that “script” is a recognizable or typical narrative whose whole is implied by its beginning. This beginning implies jokes or the script itself. Raskin’s (1985) semantic script theory explains the fact that jokes are incongruous and may involve some sort of misdirection. For instance, the incompatibility or incongruity of two scripts in a joke may warrant a speaker to leave the realm of bona fide speech to find a way to resolve the incongruity. However, to do this, the speaker does not veer off the bona fide order intentionally. By bona fide, it means that the speech is based on fact, or it is truthful and serious. A non-bona fide speech, on the other hand, involves telling lies, joking, or acting which are found in Gordons’ comic relays. Raskin(1995) explains that the semantic script theory of humor (SSTH) validates the fact that verbal humor can be described as a “text containing two aspects of 2 opposing “scripts” which are both compatible with the joke text; and that the humor comes in the realization of how the two scripts, ostensibly opposed, can both be compatible within the context of the joke” (Raskin 1995, p. 17).

However, when a joke begins with a tale about business and suddenly veers off the radar by relaying a joke that pertains to family in the same swoop, two opposing scripts (incongruous script) are realized; but by virtue of shared ideologies, the listeners are able to understand the main message depending on what is said at the end of the joke, which would either explain one of the scripts or the other. The more ostensive the script is the more bona fide it becomes, but most jokes are relayed within a non-bona fide speech situation; and this is where the humor mostly lies (Andrew, 2005).

## **Gordons: A short profile**

The focus of this research is on the popular Nigerian comedian, Gordons, whose real name is Godwin Komone. He is happily married with children. He got married in March 1998, while trying to stand on his feet. Gordons hails from the Urhobo-speaking tribe of Delta State, in the Southern region of Nigeria. His stage name was coined by his childhood friends during the period the alcoholic drink “Gordon’s Spark” and “Gordon’s Gin” were introduced to the Nigerian market. Gordons’ philosophy of life is “the way up is down” (Austen Ikeru:2019); implying that one must start from the scratch (lowest point) to rise and appreciate affluence; this can also be related to his poor background which made him take to fishing at the age of 12 to financially assist his poor parents being the first child of this impoverished polygamous home. When asked about the role his background and education played in his career in an interview with Nduka Otiono and Godwin Okhawere (2020), he explained that his hometown, Warri, which according to him is a hub of entertainment, played a major role in molding him, in his words “environment has a role to play when it comes to molding the character of an individual.” (Nduka and Godwin, 2020).

Gordons also ascribes his spirit of hustling and tenacity to his impoverished background, he claims that “there were a lot of pains growing up” in a bid to weather this storm of poverty, he said he had to “convert the pain to making money” through comedy, all these are basically reflected in his comic relays. Gordons attended Ighogbadu primary school in Warri, a metropolitan city in Delta state, he had his high school in Nana college and proceeded to Delta State University, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Integrated science in 1998. His career as a comedian started in 1992, then, he belonged to a gospel music band called Dc Envoys in his twenties. They performed musical comedy on religious gatherings on Campus. His passion for religion, especially Pentecostalism is often replicated in his singular charismatic interjection, “hallelujah” in all his comic performances. Gordons first public appearance as a comedian was at a religious program in Lagos in 2005. His idiosyncratic comical stance portends spiritual or religious issues that are of concern to many Nigerians.

Apart from cracking jokes concerning personal life and public experiences, Gordons also mirrors, and relays jokes about Christian practices and values in the country; and the excerpts that would be presented later in this study lends a concrete credence to this fact (Nigeria Galleria, 2017). Furthermore, A clear cut portrayal of Gordons, biography, ideologies, and philosophy has also been extracted from his in-depth interview with Nduka Otiono and Godwin Okhawere (2020). In the interview, Gordons reveals that he is not only into stand- up comedy but also doubles as a comic musician, stating that he was first a musician with a band called DC envoys before comedy. Gordons also reveals that it was Atunyota Akporobomeriere alias, Alibaba who mentored and influenced him indirectly (implying that the people he trained, trained him) through Bright Okpochafo, alias Basket mouth.

According to him, a show tagged “The Experience” in Tinubu Square, Lagos State, Nigeria in 2006 launched him into comedy professionally. He never ceased to give credit to Basket mouth whom he said gave him his platform on “Laffs and Jamz.” Gordon has performed on live shows both home and abroad, notable among them is Ayo Makun alias AY, AY Live shows, A Nite of a thousand laugh, a show which is Africa’s biggest comedy show founded in 1995 by Opa Williams. (allafrican.com:2017) To prove his formidable mettle, Gordons single handily anchored the eleventh and twelfth edition of this show between 2012 to 2015. He had also toured eight countries in Europe in 2008.

Gordons’ unique ways of dramatizing comedy sort him out among his contemporaries which also made him earned the name as the most decorated comedian apart from being one of the ten funniest comedians in Nigeria. He has who won the best comedian of the year in 2011 to his credit; an award which was given to him by the Nigerian Entertainment Award Organization in New York. Gordons ascribes his unique comic architecture to an innate disposition which he calls “natural gift” buttressing that a comedian can be likened to a surgeon or gynaecologist who does his work by surgical healing however his is to make people laugh thereby implying the therapeutic nature of laughter to humans. This saw him through his brainchild tagged, *Comedy Clinic* which he has successfully anchored from late 2016 till date, this program has been segmented in “wards” akin to the hospital ward where healing is performed. He revealed in an interview with Channel Television, one of the prestigious television stations in Nigeria that he is a doctor of comedy clinic. The latest of this peculiar project of his is “*Ward*” 8 showing on various social media platforms especially YouTube in 2020.

There is no doubt that Gordons takes pride in what he does to earn a living stating that he does Comedy as a full-time job because, in his words, “I don’t do any other thing aside comedy, I want to do it properly.” He also ascribes the art of comedy to science buttressing that “collating data to make one’s material relevant is very tasking and that is the science form of comedy” (Nduka and Godwin, 2020). When asked about his international profile, Gordon reveals that he is still building his profile but has 65% great followers all over the world, hoping to build it up to 80 or 90%. On responding to the

future of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, Gordons hinges its potential growth on establishing a professional governing body to pilot the affairs of the comedians. While comparing African comedy to that of the U.S, he reiterated frankly that Africans are yet to get to its peak, but he acknowledges Trevor Noah of South Africa who is making positive rave in the U.S, and Basket mouth who he said is trying to boost the comedy business in Nigeria to an international competitive standard.

Talking about gender role in African comedy, Gordons opines that the notable female comedienne in Nigeria such as Helen Paul, Lepacious Bose, Princess and the pioneer of them all, Mandy, should be bold to keep the comedy boat sailing without fear. Gordon on a personal note, draws a parallel line between comedy and politics, stating that for him, the two cannot be mixed, he stated that his only business with politics is when he is invited to perform as a comedian on a political platform and nothing more, he concluded by reiterating that he is a comedian and not a politician. Gordons passion for religion especially the Pentecostal movement is unwavering as he unveils his project called Comedy clinic, where he likened the therapeutic effect of his comedy constructs to that of healing which takes place in the church while the pastor preaches, he cites examples of such preachers who are also comedians; the likes of Joseph Duplantis a Pentecostal Pastor based in New Orleans, U.S, founder of the Jesse Duplantis Ministries and Joel Osteen, an American pastor in Lakewood church, a televangelist based in Houston, Texas. Gordons wraps up this response to this discussion by buttressing that “it is who you are that you impact into others.” It is important to also state that Gordons is one of the ten funniest comedians in Nigeria and the first Nigerian Comedian to feature in CNN, a giant television outlet, in 2017. He has also earned some endorsement deals with several notable organizations, some of these are Ifeanyi Uba ‘s Authority Newspapers, Globalcom, a communication giant and Neon Fashion, all sealed in the year 2016.

## Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria

Many Nigerian scholars, including Ayakoroma (2013), have traced the history of stand-up comedy in Nigeria to the emergence of village spokesmen, especially at ceremonial occasions, who were contracted to anchor events. In these roles, “they spice-up these events with jokes and other acts in order to keep the people lively and entertained” (p. 2). However, the Stand-up comedy act, as it is known today, did not become serious business until Atunyota Akporobomeriere, alias Ali Baba, came on the scene. Ali Baba did his first show in 1988, at the Pavilion of then Bendel State University, Ekpoma, now renamed Ambrose Ali University, Edo State, in the Southern region of Nigeria. He did this comedy entertainment for a paltry fee of fifty naira only (₦50) which is equivalent to \$0.13 only (Ayakoroma, 2013: p. 4). Ali Baba dared the odds about the collective negative perception of people about comedians and their art. To his credit, he is said to have achieved a breakthrough in comedy (Ayakoroma, p.4). One of the ways Ali Baba did this, according to Nwanne (2013), was to erect three billboards in strategic locations in Lagos, Nigeria: Ozumba Mbadiwe Street, Victoria Island; Osborne Road, Ikoyi; and Marina, all in Lagos Island. The billboards carried a simple message: “Ali Baba – Being Funny is Serious Business”; and this signalled the transformation of the business of stand-up comedy in the country (p. 1).

Nwanne (2013) notes that by 1998, Ali Baba had registered a company, “Ali Baba Hicuppuray3rd”. This signalled one of the contemporary attempts aimed at packaging stand-up comedy in a corporate business mode. Others in this crop of first-generation professional Nigerian Comedians are Julius Agwu, Okechukwu Onyegbule, alias Okey Bakassi; and Basorge Taria Junior, to mention a few. However, prior to Ali Baba’s “packaging”, there were the outstanding acts of John Chukwu, alias JC. According to Okey (2019), JC began his comic career as a master of ceremonies (MC). He was viewed as a pioneer of Stand-up comedy in Nigeria; he became more popular when he starred in Ola

Balogun's *Amadi*. He later doubled as a disc jockey in a night club. He was also seen as a versatile entertainer.

We can equally trace these early crops of notable veteran comedians to the beginning of Nigerian Nollywood movies, which started as TV soaps. They are Moses Adejumo, alias Baba Sala; Afolabi Afolayan, alias Jaguar; Usman Baba Pategi, alias Samanja; Chika Okpala, alias Zebrudaya; James Iroha, alias Gringory (a corrupt version of Gregory); Lizzy Evoeme, alias Ovuleria, Christy Essien Igbokwe, alias Apena; David Ofor, alias Clarus; Claude Eke, alias Prince Jegede, the last six of who starred in the popular Nigerian TV series, *The New Masquerade*. More on the veterans' list are Sadiq Daba, alias Bitrus; Agbonifo Enaruna, alias Idemudia; and David Ariyo, alias Kokori, who also featured in the popular Nigerian TV soap, *Hotel de Jordan*. We must not forget to add to this list, Sam Loco Efe. These individuals, indeed, paved the way for professional comedy in Nigeria.

Within the wider African setting, stand-up comedy is a thriving industry and has come to stay; with the likes of Koro Abou from Cote d'Ivoire; Ghanaian Benson Nana Yaw, alias Funny Face; and Abraham S. Labella, alias Azonic, from Liberia. The list also includes Mareshal Zongo from Mali, Mohammed Mustapha, alias Mamane, from Niger; Moussier Tombola, and Samba Sine, alias Kouthia, from Senegal (Africa Konnect, 2019, par 2-5).

## Theoretical Framework: The Semantic Script Theory of Humor

Two frameworks stand out in this study; the researcher deemed them appropriate to use in explaining the narratives of Gordons' comic constructs. The first is the semantic script theory of humor (SSTH), which is attributed to Victor Raskin (1985), while the second is the ideological interaction theory, as explained by Norman and Wodak (1997) in their work, *Critical Discourse Analysis*. According to Raskin (1985, p. 3), a humor act means "an individual occurrence of a funny stimulus", which is based on the listener's discovery of incongruity. He opines that a humor act is recognizable when listeners recognize the comedian's intention to participate in a humorous discourse; stating that the hearers laugh at the joke when they resolve the incongruity. On explaining script, Aldalian (2005) defines it as a recognizable or typical narrative whose whole is implied by its beginning. It is said to be "a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the work or evoked by it" (Raskin, 1985, p. 81).

According to Raskin (1985, p. 325), scripts are thought to represent the common-sense cognitive structures stored in the mind of the native speaker. "Scripts are motivated and justified in terms of grammaticality-cum-meaningfulness-cum appropriateness" (Raskin 1985, p. 325). Filani (2016) opines that scripts are designed to describe certain standard routines and processes through the way the native speaker views them, to provide semantic theory with a restricted and pre-structured outlook into the extra-linguistic world. Morreal (2005), having understudied Raskin's script theory, explains that five factors are necessary for verbal humor, which are itemized below:

1. A switch from bona fide to non-bona fide mode
2. Text of intended joke
3. Two partially overlapping scripts compatible with the text
4. An oppositeness relation between two scripts
5. A trigger, obvious or implied, realizing the oppositeness relation. (p. 393)

In this study, attention was drawn to this semantic script and its affordances in relation to shared ideologies of the Nigerian people. On explicating the concept of joke within an interactive (speech) context, Raskin (1985) also states that a joke is a form of non-bonafide speech (based on lies, joking or acting) where the cooperative maxim

explained by Grice (1975) is flouted. This ostensibly states that SSTH incorporates Grice's cooperative principles (maxims). These maxims are briefly explained thus: quality (let the speech be true and valid), quantity (be informative as possible), manner (avoid ambiguity; speech must be clear, orderly, and brief) and relation (be relevant). To further buttress the instance of bona fide and non- bona fide communication, Raskin (1985) explains that two scripts in a joke chain would be understood if the speaker leaves the realm of bona fide (serious conversation or speech) to a non-bona fide speech situation (joking, lying, and acting); which would enable the audience resolve incongruity in the scripts.

Creating a relationship between a joke as a text and scripts, Salvatore Attardo (1994) posits that to qualify as a joke, a text must fully or partially be compatible with 2 scripts. By compatibility, he refers to the possibility of a reader reading the text of a joke and being able to apply two different scripts at a certain point. It is pertinent to note that SSTH incorporates incongruity; however, the incongruity theory which is an enhanced aspect of superiority theory as opined by Aldalian (2005), is also a well formalized semantic script theory of humor. Aldalian (2005) also states that Raskin's (1985) work, *Semantic Mechanism of Humor* provides a holistic approach of the theory which can be applicable to a corpus of jokes. From these, it can be said that jokes are humorous recounts which must be interactive to facilitate humor. Moreover, for every joke cracked, humor is invariably expected.

In a nutshell, Raskin (1985) and Attardo (1995) conclude that humor is not just a matter of mere opinion but follows strictly a specific pattern. An aspect of the semantic script theory posits that comedians and humor makers rely on some literary forms, such as, irony, parody, rhyme, and analogy. All these were incorporated within the study.

The second framework of this study is the Ideological Interaction Theory (IIT). An ideology is a set of beliefs or opinions of a group of people. Van Dijk (1997 p.34) views ideology as "the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group." It is important to note, however, that IIT is embedded in critical discourse analysis. Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 14) explain IIT as the baseline for determining ideological perspectives, such as, social dimension, ideological creations, cultures, social status, gender, economic status, contextual discourses, and communication abilities, which are central to ideological interactions.

## Review of related Literature

Greenbaum, (1999) describes stand-up performance as a rhetorical discourse that depends on the humorist's ability to convince the audience to view the world through their comic vision, and which strives to entertain and persuade the audience. Greenbaum (1999, p.33) also states explicitly that stand-up comedy is an inherently rhetorical discourse, which strives not only to entertain, but to persuade; and that stand-up comic can only be successful in their craft when they can convince an audience to look at the world through their comic vision.

Ojaide and Eseogene (2020) look at the tradition and subjectivities in Warri-related comedians and their arts and find that subjectivities, the commonalities, and individual talents have bestowed success on the four Warri-born comedians they studied. In doing their investigation, the sociological approach, and neo-historic concepts were adopted.

Regarding the use of formulaic expressions by stand-up comedians, Adetunji (2013, p.20), observes that "Nigerian comedians use signature tunes to begin their monologues and as boundary markers to signal the start and end of a joke." Just like with any other conversation, stand-up performance is also aimed at achieving certain goals. In this study of formulaic expression, it achieved the same conversational goals with conversational joking, which is the elicitation of humorous effects in the recipients."

Ray Chikogu and Dilichukwu Efobi (2019) carried out a study based on the transition, religion, and humor with a view to interrogating the cognitive boundaries of the

humorous, centering on the use of Nigerian Pidgin by comedians to relay jokes. They posit that the use of Pidgin “is understood as being uniquely informal in tone (Nigeria) and it easily lends itself to comic adaptations” (p. 30).

Donkor (2013) engages political discourse in line with stand-up comedy with the title, “Selling the president, stand-up comedy, and the ‘politricks’ of indirection in Ghana.” His study seems more like a satirical recount of the ills found in the political sector in Ghana. Obadare (2009) explores ridicule, humor and what, following Eghosa Osagaha, he tags *infrapolitics* and civil society in Nigeria and concludes that it is pertinent to incorporate humor into the civil society discourse. Ibukun Filani (2020) adopts a discourse theory to national identity in Nigeria. He studied four notable comedians, and in doing this, reveals four identities embedded in their comic constructs.

Nwosu (2015) pays attention to Nollywood Cinema and the semiotics of laughter while Ndonge, Yieke & Onyango (2015) in Kenya focused the study on jokes aimed at ethnicity. Ogoanah and Ojo (2018) explore the multimodal generic perspective in Nigerian stand-up comedy, a study that explicates the fact that stage management, non-verbal cues, music, speeches, sounds, and body postures show how plausible multimodal ESP approach to genre is embedded in the description of stand-up comedy in the Nigerian context.

From the foregoing literature review, one can surmise that there is a gap in the study of SSTH towards the explication of meaning in the stand-up comedy art in Nigeria. Consequently, all the studies above incorporate two or more comedians; they are either studies based on a geographical location such as Warri, a country, or a continent. This study varies from the above in the sense that it capitalizes its focus on one notable ace comedian, Gordons, who, according to Wahab (2020), is one of the funniest comedians Nigeria has produced. Ikeru (2019) also states that Gordons has won several awards, one of which is the best stand-up comedian in Nigeria at the Nigeria Entertainment Awards in the year 2011. According to Ikeru (2019), Gordons is also one of the richest and most influential comedians in Nigeria with a net worth of \$3m.

## Methodology and Design

The research method is descriptive and qualitative. It consists of three steps, namely: collecting, presenting, and analyzing the data. Primary data are restricted to extracts of Gordon’s jokes from *GloLaffta Fest*, which were downloaded from YouTube. With the 60 minutes comedy rendition, 2 excerpts with a total of 24 jokes (though separately numbered within each excerpt) were selected purposefully by the criterion of the presence of the semantic scripts and the ideological mappings that served as premises for the interpretation of the scripts. The texts were transcribed using broad transcription of Gail Jefferson’s (2004) Standard Transcription Method, which is also known as Jefferson Notation System. This system involves a set of symbols used for transcribing talk; a system used universally by scholars working on Conversational Analysis. Consequently, the transcription done here was manual as the researcher listened to the audio rendition repeatedly to ascertain the right symbolic annotation to each stressed and unstressed word in the comic rendition of the studied comedian, Gordons. Gordon’s jokes were selected because apart from his unique ways of dramatizing his comedy which distinguishes him from his contemporaries, his works have been widely acclaimed in Nigeria. Moreover, The Nigerian Pidgin which is creolized in Mid-Western Nigeria is generally acceptable on the Nigerian Comedy platform and Gordons is known for his dexterity in the use of the language for joke performances. That notwithstanding, for general appraisal and broader accessibility, the jokes in Nigerian Pidgin were translated to English where necessary. The translations are written right below the Nigeria Pidgin.

## Data presentation and analysis:

### Semantic script as a tool for interpreting humor construct: A Case Study of Gordons' Performances.

This section discusses jokes in stand-up comedy as embodied in scripts and how the incongruity of each script in a sloop instance creates meaning and humorous effects through insights drawn from shared ideologies. In the excerpt below, the comedian, Gordons, critiques a peculiar Pentecostal church in Nigeria called "Celestial Church" (a famous worship center where members adorn themselves in white garments) and their doctrinal practices which, based on the Nigerian religious collective belief, seem outlandish.

Gordons achieves this humor-inducing church script by denigrating himself. He presents an illustration of himself through the *church script* and the *salvation script*. Through the salvation script, he portrays himself as one in search of salvation and a life-changing encounter with God. (The event took place in a church he had earlier visited; he also said that he had initially visited several other churches with an expectation of healing. According to him, and based on his recount, his first encounter with the celestial church was not pleasant.) There is a partial overlap in both scripts (the *church script* and the *salvation script*); the audience understands this humorous relay by virtue of their shared knowledge on the heightened religious followership in Nigeria.

#### Excerpt 1

##### Godwin Komone (Gordons)

((COMEDIAN SINGING, AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

(1) ↑WONDERF:: UL↑ (0.1)

(2) ↑Do you know THAT...?↑ (0.2)

(3) In my↓ QUEST↓ for salvation, I have BEEN to many CHURCH::ES(...) (0.4)

(4) ↑The first ↑ chur:ch I went TO was >Celestial church<

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

(5) ALL ↑those PEople can FLO::G (0.2) \_\_\_\_\_

Those people are good at flogging.

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

(6) They go FLOG you, You and your destiny WILL determine, (.) ↓ where una wan↓<sup>0</sup>go<sup>0</sup>

(0.4)\_\_\_\_\_They will flog you, you and your destiny will have to determine a destination.

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

(7) If you see↑ Cele pastor ↑dey do like this (0.2) \_\_\_\_\_If you see Celestial pastor coming

like this, ((COMEDIAN MOVING BACKWARDS))(0.4)

((AUIDEANCE SHOUTING AND LAUGHING))



- (8) ↑Omo RUN↑<sup>0</sup>oh°\_\_\_\_\_ You have to run ((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))
- (9) ↑Na KOBOKO↑ <dey come so>\_\_\_\_\_ You have a horsewhip coming your way
- (10)BY the time >dey finish flogging you <\_\_\_By the time they are through flogging you
- (11) By YOUR ownSTRI:PES YOU will be HEAL:ED...↓(0.5)
- (12) COMEDIAN: Hello!!!!!!!!!!!!
- ((AUIDEANCE SHOUTING AND LAUGHING))
- (Gordons 00: 00:54)

The audience accompanies Gordon's entrance with clapping as he mounts the stage singing and dancing. The comedian captures and sustains the attention of the audience by asking them a rhetorical question in line 2: "Do you know that?" This also gives him the opportunity to take charge of the show, and this depicts a bona fide conversation, he does this to get their attention. He begins to narrate his experiences with the many churches he has attended or visited in his quest for salvation in line 3. Once again, the ideology of what seem appropriate in religious practices in Nigeria come into play, this also shows how conscious the Nigerian people are when it comes to religious doctrines and practices, and it is against this backdrop they begin to find humour in the jokes relayed.

- (3) In my↓ QUEST↓ for salvation, I have BEEN to many CHURCH::ES(...) (0.4)

His first encounter happens to be with Celestial pastors in line 4.

- (4) ↑The first ↑ chur:chI went TO was >Celestial church

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

The mention of "Celestial Church" (a famous religious worship center where members adorn themselves in white garments); line 4 elicits humor (laughter) among the audience while reflecting on the collective belief about the Celestial Church among other Christian denominations the audience are conversant with in Nigeria. At this point, the humor starts building up. The comedian strengthens his plight by giving an instance of what most Celestial Church leaders in Nigeria do, in line 5. Once again, another script is established (i.e., *script of torture*) which is relayed in a non-bona fide recount of the Celestial Church. At this point the humor is heightened.

By insinuating the *church script*, Gordons unintentionally introduces the incongruous effect of the church (which is supposed to be a solemn place of worship and spiritual cleansing) and (a place where reformation is carried out through physical torture; one which is carried out using a horsewhip, called *koboko* in the Nigerian local parlance), once again, the understanding of this humor is in the non-bona-fide speech which is realized at the point where the two partially opposing scripts (in this case church script and salvation script) are compatible.

- (5) ALL ↑those PEople can FLO::G (0.2) ((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

The build-up of tension as a result of expectation (as to whether the comedian will state the fact that they flog or not) is suddenly released in the form of laughter when the comedian, in fact, actually states it in line 5. The laughter that follows the incongruity in the joke is a way of affirming that the Celestial Church's practice of flogging out demons from a possessed human body is contrary to several other Christian beliefs. In line 6, he

emphasizes the intensity of the action of flogging and what happens afterwards, not only through words, but also by his facial expression and body movement. At this point, another script switch is triggered through a non-bona fide recount, as is seen in line 6 below.

(6) They go FLOG you, You and your destiny WILL determine, (.) ↓ where una wan↓<sup>0</sup>go<sup>0</sup>  
Translation: If they (referring to the Celestial Church pastors) flog you, you and your destiny will determine your destination.

This humor is heightened because of the non-bona fide recount of personalizing one's destiny by way of separating it from the individual. Here destiny (an abstract entity) and a human entity are presented as two distinct individuals: quite funny indeed!

(0.4)

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

(7) If you see↑ Cele pastor ↑dey do like this (0.2)

((COMEDIAN MOVING BACKWARDS))(0.4)

((AUDIENCE SHOUTING AND LAUGHING))

(8) ↑Omo RUN↑<sup>0</sup>oh<sup>0</sup>——you have to run

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

(9) ↑Na KOBOKO↑ <dey come so> \_\_\_\_a trashing horsewhip is imminent

From the joke in lines 7-9, the text presents 2 scripts which are still functions of the previous texts in Excerpt 1. Once again, an opposing script is presented alongside the church script in line 7-9, which can be tagged *torture script*. These scripts, unlike the previous two (*church script* and *salvation script*) are quite opposed to each other but there lies the incongruity effect through which the comedian creates humor. A church is a place of worship, to seek salvation, not a place of torture. The audience further bursts into laughter because of the incongruity associated with the context; whereby, rather than bring the worshipper joy, church attendance brings them sorrow.

(10) BY the time >dey finish flogging you <

(11) By YOUR own STRIPES YOU will be HEAL:ED...↓(0.5)

Gordons releases the punch line, a biblical declaration in lines 10-11, with the keyword being, STRIPES. There lies another script switch, an overlapping one, unlike the immediate former one. What is presented here is the *church script* and the *healing script*. Here also, the comedian infuses a non-bona fide recount into a bona fide recount, to create humor. The fusion is in the fragmented sentence drawn from the Bible and completed with his neologism. The bona fide biblical extraction is “By His stripes you are healed”; but Gordons reformulates his (still bothering on the effect of flogging as relayed alongside the previous church script), as seen in lines 10-11. It is important to note here that humor is not only created when there is a switch between bona fide to non-bona fide speech; it could be vice versa, as seen above.

The utterance “By your OWN Stripes YOU will be Healed” echoes the Biblical declaration relating to faith, stating that by the stripes (flogging) and pains which Jesus Christ sustained (before crucifixion) or by his redemptive suffering, a believer is saved. This is illustrated as: “By His stripes you are healed,” in the Bible. Thus, the statement is incongruous as it stresses the idea for emphasis, thereby exaggerating its point and leading to laughter. The humorous effect of the healing script from the perspective of incongruity theory is the violation of the expectations of the audience. Gordons, instead of saying, “by

his stripes you are healed”, says, “by your own stripes you will be healed.” “Stripes” here refer to the bruises left by the powerful strokes of the horsewhip wielded by the Celestial Church pastor. This contradiction is what becomes incongruous and humorous.

Gordon’s jokes create humorous effects by raising the expectation of the audience and violating it, and by the ridicules the comedian faces, making the audience feel superior. In the excerpt above, the comedian may be echoing his own expectation that someone must have had such an experience in their search for salvation and deliverance; and he expresses a mocking attitude to this belief that whoever has had an encounter with Celestial Church pastors would behave as he had expected. Once again, this is hinged on the collective belief in Nigeria where its people place high values on the Church and religious leaders. Also, the ideology of what seems appropriate in religious context in Nigeria comes into play, thereby showing the consciousness of some Nigerians in relation religious doctrines and practices. It also goes on to prove that religious leaders are revered in Nigeria. This is also the background knowledge that informs the Nigerian audience’s engagement with the humorous quality in the jokes relayed.

### **Semantic script as a tool for interpreting collective religious belief**

In the excerpt below, Gordons mentions the Boko Haram Islamic sect, a religious extremist group in Northeastern Nigeria, and links it incongruously to Innocent Idibia, a famous Nigerian hip pop musician, popularly known as 2Face (aka Tuface or Tu Baba), and famous for his hit single debut, “My African Queen” (2014). Two scripts are opposed in the relay, but through shared knowledge, they somehow overlap. The scripts are the religious script and 2Face Idibia (baby daddy) script.

#### **EXCERPT 2**

1. COMEDIAN: ↑The GREAT:EST LIE ANYbody can LISTen to↑
2. COMEDIAN: °Is° WHen °you°>BOmbYOUR:self, YOU go to meet 72

VIRgins.<\_\_\_Is when you bomb yourself, you will earn 72 virgins in heaven.

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

3. AUDIENCE: ↑75↑
4. COMEDIAN: ↓OK 75↓

((COMEDIAN LAUGHING))

5. COMEDIAN: ↑FOR where?↑
6. COMEDIAN: <THAT’S the biggest fraud of the millennium>
7. COMEDIAN: ↑You MEAN to tell me 72 VIRGINS↑ >are somewhere existing and

2FACE is still ALIVE?< (0.3)

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

8. COMEDIAN: ↑THAT’S a Lie↑
9. COMEDIAN: ↑THAT’S a Lie↑

((AUDIENCELAUGHING, SHOUTING AND CLAPPING))

10. COMEDIAN:↑THAT’S a Lie↑

11. COMEDIAN: He for DON drink RAT Poison ↑DIE VAN:ISH \_\_\_\_He (2Face) would have since ingested rat poison and died.

12. COMEDIAN: ↑THAT GUY does not PL:ay with his WORKER of INIquities↑

(0.4)\_\_\_\_That boy (2Face in this context) does not play with his worker of iniquities

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

13. COMEDIAN: >I'M telling you<

14. COMEDIAN: HE knows HIM:SELF very well (ref:2Face)

((COMEDIAN AND AUDIENCE LAUGHING)) (Gordons 00:01:00)

In lines 1-4, the audience responds to the comedian's utterance with laughter, having realized the common grounds of the opposing scripts, which are incongruous. The introduction of 2Face Idibia in line 7 is the utmost incongruous aspect of the recount. In this joke, he begins with a non-bona fide relay of negating the extreme belief of the Islamic sect that if they carry out a suicide-bomb attack on non-believers, they will be rewarded with 72 virgins in heaven. However, this is a mere myth, as Kidwai (2018, par. 1) puts it: "the Qur'an does not mention the number 72 at all. It would have been mentioned in *The Hadith*, but *The Hadith* is not the Qur'an." However, *The Hadith*, according to Khalife (2017, par.1), is a collection of reports describing the life of Prophet Mohammed, which states that "every male admitted into paradise will be given eternal erections and wed to 72 wives." This, therefore, goes further to prove that the assumed bona fide situation from which Gordons wishes to switch this religious script is not as bona fide as it seems. Moreover, this belief of 72 virgins has been a collectively held belief of the religious sect Boko Haram. This also goes to show that switching from non-bona fide communication to another non-bona fide communication can equally elicit humor.

1. ↑The GREAT:EST LIE ANYbody can LISTen to↑

2. °Is° WHEN °you° >BOmbYOUR:self, YOU go to meet 72 VIRgins.<

3. AUDIENCE: ↑75↑

4. COMEDIAN: ↓OK, 75↓

Gordons as well dissociates himself from the utterance with the use of the concept "*yourself*" and the second person pronoun "*You*". This is to air his views against the Islamic religious belief, also because he considers it idea unrealistic. This further makes the interpretation effort relieving. Another way to explain line (2) would be to say that the listener adjusts the sense of the pronouns, *you* and *yourself* to mean that the person would bomb himself or die by suicide for the singular reason of being rewarded with 75 virgins. Also, on hearing this, the audience will automatically relate the referent of *you* and *yourself* directly to the Islamic extremists' suicide bombers. Here, the audience will have to work on adjusting their own understanding of recollecting the contemporary scourge of Boko Haram ravaging Northeastern Nigeria which has become a collective concern. The actualization of this is depicted in line (2-4).

Gordons believes that there is no place either in heaven or on earth where there are so many virgins, let alone using them to entertain suicide bombers. Here also is another switch to the religious script. The scripts here are the *75 virgins' script* and the *non-75 virgins' script*; quite opposite in outlook but partially overlapping, based on the shared religious belief. The audience resolves the incongruity based on their shared knowledge of what is

common practice within the Nigerian religious domain. This shared knowledge is drawn from the insecurity in Nigeria orchestrated by religious terrorism.

Also, in line 7, Gordons creates another script by introducing the personality of 2Face, the popular Nigerian music artiste. It has been rumored that the musician has a reputation of having multiple intimate relationships with women and has impregnated some—although, this is from a non-bona fide conversation. Gordons, basing his jokes on this rumor and the reprehensible objectification of women, believes that even if multiples of virgins exist, the likes of 2Face would rush to feast on them before the Boko Haram suicide bombers. This is where the incongruity of the scripts is resolved, as the religious script and 2Face script have overlapped with this statement made by Gordon (that even though many virgins exist anywhere, the likes of 2Face would go there to feast on them before the suicide bombers).

2. °Is° WHen °you° >BOmbYOUR:self, YOU go to meet 72 VIRgins.<
3. AUDIENCE: ↑75↑
4. COMEDIAN: ↓OK, 75↓

From the monologue above, we can deduce that the audience was able to quickly respond to the mistake of the comedian by correcting him on 75 as against 72 he stated earlier. Part of Gordons' utterance in line (3) can be understood as echoing the audience's earlier utterance "75 VIRGINS" and by so doing, communicating their own attitude to it implicitly. The attitude is expressed positively, claiming that the actual figures of the said virgins are 75, other than 72 as popularly believed. This also shows that the non-bona fide communication elicits more laughter within the comic terrain than the bona fide communication. This also goes further to reveal the influence of patriarchy in the Nigerian religious scene as women become objects of pacification and recompense. The idea of virginity becomes more synonymous with women than with men, whereas virginity is a moral choice which is not gender specific.

The person of 2Face and the Islamic notion of a 75-virgin bounty for suicide bombing, are the stereotypes of the immediate victims in Gordon's incongruous utterances. The audience, while processing the comedian's utterance according to the available semantic scripts, is initially puzzled by Gordons' incongruous utterance; but finally resolves the puzzle by reprocessing his utterances from line 1 to 7. From the excerpt, Gordons does not seem to think about the opposite side of his words; rather, he simply echoes the controversial Islamic belief that anyone who dies in suicidal killing will be rewarded with 75 virgins in his afterlife. He strongly expresses a negative attitude and refutes this belief through his utterances and body language. The monologue, which is about 2Face, and the 75 virgins clearly echoes the thought of those who die by suicide and think they will later be rewarded with 75 virgins. The belief is however ironic when the utterance is made with 2Face in the picture. He says:

7. ↑You MEAN to tell me 75 VIRGINS↑>are somewhere existing and 2:FACE is still ALIVE?< (0.3)

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

There is a clash between both ideas; the very presence of 2Face with the widely held perception of his controversial marital status. Here, Gordons paints a mental picture of a situation where 2Face is in the same place as the assumed 'virgins.' Also, the irony of the proposition is that there will not be any virgins left in paradise by the time 2Face is done with them. Quite hilarious! In lines 8-11, Gordons repeatedly emphasizes these points,

expecting that the audience infer the meanings differently; that is, in both character or attitude, which are literally stated in the expressions:

8. ↑THAT'S a Lie! ↑
9. ↑THAT'S a Lie!↑
10. AUDIENCE: ((*LAUGHING, SHOUTING AND CLAPPING*))
11. COMEDIAN: ↑THAT'S a Lie!↑

Contextually, the repeated senses of the phrase, “*that's a lie*,” are pragmatically strengthened by the audience to a more intense kind of *lie* because of the repeated use. The comedian's attitude towards the utterance is negative, even as the mental state of its use is more highly intended than in other uses. Nevertheless, the pragmatic inferences made by the audience help adjust their sense of the word *lie* to mean that it is not remotely possible to have 75 virgins with the person like 2Face in the picture; and the interpretation deduced from it is that nothing of such exists. However, the inclusion of 2Face is what creates the room for shouting, clapping, and laughter among the audience. This also shows that humor lies in incompatibility of scripts and the cognitive ability of the audience to process this incompatibility to a compatible resolve. This is what heightens the humor in the scripts. Gordons seems bent on debunking this belief. He says in line 3-6:

3. AUDIENCE: ↑75↑
4. COMEDIAN: ↓OK, 75↓
5. COMEDIAN: ↑FOR where?↑
6. <THAT'S the biggest fraud of the millennium>

By uttering the common Nigerian Pidgin rhetorical expression, “for where?” in line 5, Gordons does not merely seek any form of information or response from his audience; instead, he only expresses a negative attitude towards the entire content of the joke and the thought therein. Pragmatically, the unarticulated constituents are because of the audience's assumption of a mutual or collective notion about the personality of 2Face. The notion of morality and ideal social conduct is depicted in this comic relay, once again. It shows how the Nigerian populace view their celebrities and assess them like a public morality police. This moral stance and social demeanor contribute to making the joke on 2face above elicit laughter.

## Conclusion

The comic relays by Gordons are interactive and educative because of his creative and vivid imaginative ability to represent moral issues, perceptions and public opinions drawn from contemporary Nigerian situations. These situations range from the religious, cultural values and norms, celebrity news as it pertains moral etiquettes, to insecurity aggravated by terrorism. The base line appears to be that no matter the strategy involved in any comedic construct, humor is the intended goal. However, the ability to access these comic relays is largely dependent on their affordances, which are centered on the semantic scripts provided in the jokes relayed and most importantly, the ideological construct. This study is informed by Raskin's (1985) and Salvatore's (1997) theory that every joke is a text with a possibility of having two partially compatible or incompatible scripts, whose resolution to its interpretation is hinged on the realization of where these opposing scripts overlap or are made compatible.

From the ongoing analysis, it could be seen that religion; the artiste, Tuface; torture and salvation scripts, are used frequently by Gordons in his comic performances reviewed

in this study. Sometimes, these tropes are deployed in opposition to one another, to create humor. The resolution point of these scripts is traceable to the understanding of their incongruity and the semantic affordances by the audience, which are drawn from their shared knowledge, ideas, beliefs, and social exposure. The study also demonstrates that humor is basically elicited when a comedian relays his talk in a non-bona fide way rather than in a bona fide construct which are understood based on background knowledge of the happenings in the society. The implication of this is that to entertain people on the Nigerian stage through comedy, there are elements of lying or at best exaggeration, joking and acting to foreground the humor point which the audience finds quite fascinating and entertaining in stand-up performances.

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