



Book Review

Of love, adversity, resilience, and the triumph of a stand- up comedian

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The Memoirs of an African Comedian by Bakassi, Okey. Lagos: Tribal Marks Media. 206 pages.

Okey Bakassi's *The Memoirs of an African Comedian* (2019) offers a remarkable addition to the growing shelf of memoirs by Nigerian comedians, a genre perhaps best characterized by Julius Agwu's *Jokes Apart* (2013). Memoirs are reflective mirrors through which we peer into the life of the author-subject in view. Though running the risk of hagiography, memoirs are an important aspect of writing because they provide historical and sociological perspectives to the lives of their subject. Good memoirs give the writers the authority of their voices—it amplifies their own version of their story, allows us to see things from the perspective of the storyteller, especially if such memoir is written by a celebrity or public figure that feels misunderstood in the public domain.

Okey Bakassi's memoir emerges as an insightful exploration of the life of a young, sometimes mischievous, boy who grew up under his father's shadows within the military barracks in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, to become a household name through comedy, film, and talk shows. Through poetic representation and delightful narrativization, Okechukwu Anthony Onyegbule, popularly known as Okey Bakassi, draws us into his world from his early years. He ushers us into an intimate space of love, adversity, resilience, and eventual success.

At the centre of this narrative is family, laughter, and God. Divided into four different parts (Books One, Two, Three, and Four), Book One comprises four chapters that dwell on his upbringing and the atmosphere within which he was raised. This section comes across as an excellent study of the psychological make up of children in a low-income nuclear family, and the ways Okey paints growing up in a proletariat neighbourhood shaped himself and his peers. Growing up in a strong Catholic family full of girls and lorded over by a military father and a nurse for a mother, both equally strict, the parents teamed up to ensure that Okey did not derail, either through peer group influence or personal decision. Notwithstanding that strict home environment and Okey's bickering with his sisters, there was plenty of laughter; the family house appeared to be full of comedians without a stage. It is against this background that Okey emerged as a comedian; he had a rich culture of mimicry, caricature and jokes brewing around him.

Book Two is on becoming a man, and here we witness Okey's youthful zest and energy for the large, sometimes dangerous risks adolescents and young adults are prone to taking. The author takes readers through his first kiss and cigarette, early sexual exploration, his first-time consuming alcohol and clubbing, and his first time being arrested. As readers, we learn of an array of experiences that characterize the life of an average Nigerian boy growing up in a society that seemingly tirelessly tries to swallow up its youth that fail to moderate their lives. The importance of a well-structured and intentional family plays out in the story of young Okey. Each time he reaches beyond the limits, at the point of drowning in a lifestyle that would derail his journey to success, his upbringing comes into play, and he gets back on track. It was largely due to his upbringing that he overcame the many challenges he faced in the nascent years of his career as an actor, comedian, and "hustler" in the streets of Lagos. This upbringing culminated in a young engineering graduate converting his professional training into a calling by Nollywood, Nigeria's vibrant film industry.

Book Three consists of only two chapters (8 and 9), but is the most crucial and central section to the memoir as it offers insight into Okey Bakassi's foray into comedy and filmmaking. The section foregrounds the pivotal role Okey played in the institutionalizing of Nigeria's film and comedy industry. "The Engineer Who Lost His Way into Nollywood" is the apt title of the eighth chapter, highlighting Okey's persistent auditioning for film roles, producing his own films and that of some of his colleagues, while harnessing the diversity of the industry to champion the over two-decade old Actors' Guild of Nigeria (AGN). He was also instrumental to the founding of the Directors' Guild of Nigeria (DGN).

Chapter Nine, "The Business of Comedy", foregrounds the genesis of the Nigerian comedy industry, the organization of pilot shows such as *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* directed by Opa Williams which brought many comedians into the limelight including Okey Bakassi, Basket Mouth, Julius Agwu, Klint De Drunk, etc. The chapter also spotlights his disagreement with Opa Williams who, he claims, disenfranchised him from a co-ownership of the hit comedy show *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* that he argues was his brainchild. The chapter discusses the monetization of laughter and many other lessons deducible from the author's foray into Nigerian show business.

Book Four, the last book of the memoir, highlights the philosopher in Okey Bakassi. Akin to Julius Agwu's memoir, the conclusion is filled with sobering reflections, affording the reader the chance to look behind the scenes, beyond the fame, to better acquaint themselves with the humanity of the acclaimed comedian. Through his father's story, Okey reminisces on fatherhood including how he became a father and pays homage to underappreciated African fathers. Okey presents a fresh and consoling narrative. In Chapter Eleven, which budding comedians, entertainers and show promoters should pay keen attention to, Okey illuminates how the industry works. He shares his failures, his successes, and the lessons that come with being an A-rated comedian.

His venture into politics as an appointee to a former governor of Imo State illuminates the distinction between comedy and politics. Viewed in the context of other entertainers like Yul Edochie, Zubby Michaels, etc., taking up political positions, Okey's experience is instructive. He beams expository light on his love life, his wife, and his immediate family, highlighting how his wife and kids have coped with a father who cracks jokes for a living and has scandals that trail his career. He also writes about the pains of not being as available to his children as he would like to due to regular tours alongside the reality of living in his homeland while his family has settled in Canada.

Okey's book, as the writer and publisher Toni Kan observes in the Foreword, is a "poignant and compelling memoir" (vii). Through wit, poetry, and humour, Okey Bakassi shares his coming-of-age story of triumph over enormous challenges in the early stages of his life. Frank and down-to-earth, Okey shines uncomfortable light on aspects of what we do not see in the lives of celebrities. He illuminates the many untruths celebrities are

required to endure from media sensationalists, the pains their families undergo, the tears they shed for being the subject of gossip media. One emerges from the pages of this book with a heart full of empathy and compassion for celebrities, and face lit up with occasional laughter from reading Okey's deadpan broadsides such as his description of his car suddenly breaking down "I could not understand why a decent car threw tantrums just like that" (198).

The book would benefit from grammatical and spelling revisions that would clean up its minor typos. There is also an incompleteness to the narrative, with the reader feeling like this cannot be the totality of the story of a comedian, actor, politician, event planner, father, and businessman of Okey's calibre. But again, as Toni Kan notes in his Foreword to the book, "a memoir is like a book without a real ending" (vii). Hence, while we wait for something that comes close to a real ending, I enjoin readers to obtain a copy of this important book which examines the life and times of one of Africa's most original stand-up comedians, actors, and impresarios. The book is a delightful read, offering insights, not just for wannabe comedians, but for researchers, students, teachers of African popular culture, and the general reader.