# NOKOKO

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## The Aesthetics, Politics, and Cultural Economy of African Stand-up Comedy

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Special issue:

The Aesthetics, Politics, and Cultural Economy of African Stand-up Comedy

NOKOKO
Institute of African Studies
Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada)
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Combining spaces for academic and community reflection, *Nokoko* creates an opportunity for discussion of research that reflects on the complicated nature of pan-African issues. It provides a forum for the publication of work from a cross disciplinary perspective that reflects scholarly endeavour, policy discussions, practitioners' reflections, and social activists' thinking concerning the continent and beyond. Hosted by the Institute of African Studies at Carleton University (in Ottawa, Canada), *Nokoko* provides a space for emerging and established scholars to publish their work on Africa and the African diaspora.



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# Introduction: The Aesthetics, Politics, and Cultural Economy of African Stand-up Comedy

## Nduka Otiono

Stand-up comedy persists as one form of cultural production in Africa that defines how Africans negotiate their existence and artistically re-frame the burden of nationhood, social identities, and everyday existential challenges. At its core, stand-up comedy is a form of cultural criticism driven by aesthetic, political and economic forces. Through humour, African stand-up comedians produce alternative public spheres and commentaries, share coded messages that implicate socio-political inclusion and exclusion, the individuality of experience, and the self-critical way we think about ourselves as people.

Despite Africa's tortuous postcolonial experience, humour is emerging as a central node in reorienting African publics as to their excruciating socio-political conditions and to the urgency of imagination. Stand-up comedy, notable for the immediacy of its face-to-face interaction, is one of Africa's most popular emergent art forms—produced and circulated through multiple traditional and digital media. Yet, despite its ubiquity on the continent, especially in urban centres, stand-up comedy is regrettably among the less theorized and less analysed genre of African oral tradition and popular cultural production. In this special issue, we approach the form systematically by examining how stand-up comics reflect on identity politics in Africa, appraise the provenance and evolution of the form, while highlighting its significant contribution to the cultural economy of the continent.

For proper cultural analysis and appreciation, one must locate the roots of African stand-up comedy not only within its development in a globalized, capitalist humour industry, but in its origins in the Transatlantic slave trade and Africa's oral traditions. Doyin Aguoru's paper explores how indigenous artistic traditions and local theatres influenced the genre we know today as African stand-up comedy. Indeed, theatre was so embedded in sociality and life processes in ancient African societies that its presence and form were often taken for granted. In the words of Diakhate and Eyoh (2017), "[pre-colonial Africans] did not name their theatre; rather, they lived it" (2), Theatre was not fixed to a stage or location, but enjoyed mobility, fluidity and multilocality. Danson Sylvester Kahyana's article examines how stand-up comedy performances in Ugandan buses are harnessed towards the sale of medicine, evincing the flexibility of this indigenous theatre-based genre in the African context. In fact, theatricality was ever-present in rituals, myths, sports and recreation, folk celebrations, and politics. In the context of traditional

religion and spirituality, ritual activities encompassed incantations and divinations that invited concerned bodies—animate and inanimate—to participate in a synchronized performance that often served to consult, honour, appease, or implore higher powers. Furthermore, during large events and celebrations, community members, old and young, often gathered in public arenas to be entertained by performances including dances, songs, and creative verbal utterances. Beyond their recreational utility, these activities marked important sociocultural dispositions and transitions. They were efficient vehicles for the transfer of knowledge and tradition across generations. For these reasons, viewing oral performance in Africa as a precursor to stand-up comedy has been extensively studied by scholars of oral literature as vigorously demonstrated, for example, by a new book, *Oral Literary Performance in Africa: Beyond Genre* (2021), co-edited by Nduka Otiono and Chiji Akoma.

Chinyere Chukwudi-Okeh, a writer, blogger, and graduate student at Swansea University, offers compelling parallels between the stand-up comedian and the traditional oral performer in an unpublished essay shared with me, and titled "Locating Stand-Up Comedy in Nigeria as an Oral Performance Genre":

> The stand–up comedian utilizes the spoken word and performance in his craft. These two elements are important features of oral literature. It is through the spoken word that oral literature has been kept and continues to retain its relevance […] The people's oral culture reflects their everyday activities and conditions, the kind of work they do, what kind of families they have, etc. Consequently, their oral literature also expresses concerns beyond people's everyday life [...] Its riches are evident in the deep and often oracular sense of wisdom and in the imaginative flair of these representative pieces. Therefore, the range of subjects is vast for the stand–up comedian to explore…On this note, it is important to state that stand–up comedians draw from the tradition and culture of oral performance origin i.e., from folklore, panegyric, proverbs, philosophical ideas, and myths in their comedy, with the twin function of entertaining and, more importantly, addressing relevant issues in the society. Therefore, it will not be far-fetched to suggest that stand-up comedy is an aspect of oral dramatic performance enacted by a solo performer before a live audience. This assertion is not unmindful of the entertainment or the functional value of the stand–up comedy genre; rather it is an etiological attempt to locate it within the cultural fabric of the society. (1)

The idea of an "oral dramatic performance enacted by a solo performer before a live audience" is somewhat different in the context of oral performance in Africa. For, indeed, in the traditional context, the oral artist often performs with musical accompanist(s) and/or a choral group. Likewise, in the study of oral performance in Africa, the emphasis is as much on the contents of oral texts as it is on the context or aesthetics of performance. This is clear from my study of Nweke Momah, a spectacular oral artist, jester, and cross-dressing comedian from Ubulu-Uku in Delta State of Nigeria.[1] Also a court historian and musician, his performances were a kind of total theatre complete with storytelling, music, dance, rib-cracking jokes, anecdotes, phrases, and other stylistic features that often left his audiences roaring with laughter and aesthetically satiated.

But the kinship between oral literature or folklore and the populist stand-up comedy notwithstanding, we must take seriously Ian Brodie's cautionary note on the intersection of folklore and popular culture in relation to stand-up comedy. As Brodie (2014) notes, "Despite analogies to vernacular form of talk, and despite the stand-up comedian's frequent use of vernacular forms of talk, the relationship between audience and performer, in terms of systems of exchange and in terms of spatiotemporal distance, however slight, make it 'something other'" (18). Brodie goes on to articulate a panoramic characterization

[1] Nduka Otiono, "Nweke Momah: A Portrait of an Oral Artist." Unpublished Masters Thesis. University of Ibadan, 1987. We can also draw parallels with the Akewi-Oba of Yoruba palaces who serve essentially similar purposes as court historians and entertainers. On the traditional masking as a means of delivering anonymous social commentary, it is pertinent to invoke the Gẹlẹdẹ masquerade in Yoruba communities. This cadre of ancestral spirit is the only cult to which women may be initiated, and the performance of which is then seen as appropriate social representation from the female voice of the land. For more on the Gẹlẹdẹ see Drewal and Drewal (1983).

of "stand-up comedy" in his canonical study, *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy*.

Beyond the conceptual understanding of stand-up performances, the African oral performances referenced above can be read as a means of social commentary where the exciting and mundane aspects of society are critically explored and dramatized. This is in addition to referencing the social values and norms of the people. In the realm of politics and indigenous government, such as in the king's court where the likes of Nweke Momah served as the repository of communal history and culture, performances came alive with talking drums and percussive instruments common in West African cultures—especially among the Yoruba people of Nigeria and the Serer people of Senegal and Gambia. Through the talking drums, highly skilled drummers could sing praises to the king, entertain spectators with creative rhythms, or relay important messages from ruler to subjects or across villages in times of war and celebration. Similarly, among numerous ethnic groups across Africa, alongside their theatrical functions, masquerades played the role of social control. Accorded reverence as spirit beings, and behind the veil of the mask, masquerades could speak the unspeakable as well as punish a person who had broken community laws. Orji (2018) traces how African masking traditions with their embodiment of humour and social commentary are deeply connected to the emergent stand-up comedy industry where comedians employ the performative anonymity of indigenous masquerades to criticize both the ordinary and the powerful. Indeed, theatre, sociality, justice, and humour were intertwined in precolonial African societies, as they are in contemporary iterations of indigenous theatre.

However, the permeation of colonialism in the African continent, which enabled the influence of European ideals and cultural institutions on indigenous artistic expressions, occasioned the adulteration of traditional forms of socialization and identity expression – the basis of African theatre. To disrupt the processes of societal meaning-making was to transform – in fact, destabilize, the foundations of everyday performances in African societies. But although theatre in its structural forms may have been reimagined, its functions remain immersed in current cultural expressions and economy. In more than a few ways, the mimetics of drama, the levity of humour, the melodies of music, and the spontaneous creativity of storytelling are synthesized in African stand-up comedy, as in African theatre. Today, one frequently finds stand-up comedians incorporating elaborate singing or dancing in their routines. Nigerian stand-up comedians such as Kenny Blaq, Akpororo, and Chigurl and Josh2Funny are known to thrill their audiences with songs and dance steps on stage, which they weave into their comedic material. In Kenya, Redykyulass Comedy, featuring comedians Tony Njuguna, Walter Mong'are, and John Kiarie alias KJ, became popular for parodying Kenya's past leaders through a kind of stage-performed comedy that crisscrossed storytelling, wordplay, mimicry, singing and dancing. Also worth noting are Kenya's televised weekly live stand-up comedy show, Churchill Show, and the award-winning XYZ Show, a sardonic puppet show created by Kenya's Gado (Godfrey Mwampembwa) which caricatures Africa's grotesque political leadership. This affinity for the theatrical can be seen in African movies in the unique way existential realities are dramatized. They live on in the music of Africans and the African diaspora such as hip hop, soul music, afrobeat and highlife. They are even more prominent in emergent social media comedy—especially skit-making—which is a spin-off of stand-up comedy on the continent. They tell a story not of a lost civilization, but of culture in transition.

This volume signifies its importance by underscoring the rootedness of the genre in the contemporary sociopolitics and indigenous traditions of African people at home and in the diaspora, alongside the complex role stand-up comedy plays in how people construct social identities and navigate everyday struggles. Despite the proliferation and influence of comedians and their art, African stand-up comedy as a subject of scholarly inquiry has not been accorded due attention. On a broader note, even comedy as a sociocultural phenomenon in Africa has been undertheorized. In the last two decades, a few scholars

have theorized the role of comedy in its various forms in contemporary society. Bamidele's compilation of essays on comedy, published in 2001, is often cited in scholarly discussions about humour/comedy in Africa, especially in the context of stage performances. The essays explored the different configurations of comedy, from dark comedy, to satire, to sentimental comedy in popular literature and theatre.

Another early theorist of humour in Africa is Durotoye Adeleke (2005). Examining the concept of "the fool" in Yoruba plays and video films in parallel with Shakespearean notions of "the fool" in literary imagination, Adeleke positions Yoruba traditional productions/expressions of humour in a global cultural economy. While he acknowledges Western influences on indigenous artistic forms, he renders the Yoruba iterations unique and traces their emergence from a long artistic tradition. Ebenezar Obadare's work on how civil society performs everyday politics both formally and informally is concerned with the diverse utilities and meanings of humour in postcolonial African states. His book *Humor, Silence, and Civil Society in Nigeria* (2016) is an important piece as it foregrounds what humour means to a people facing grave multidimensional injustices that are both historical and contemporary. He also reminds us that humour is not exclusive to civil society but is often used by the state to control its subjects (Obadare 2009). Obadare believes that in Africa, humour is often employed as a means of sociocultural improvisation, as a coping strategy for an embattled people.

Approaching political humour from another perspective, Limb and Olaniyan's edited book, *Taking African Cartoons Seriously: Politics, Satire, and Culture* (2018) sheds light on the influence of critical illustrations in the media. This collection is peculiar both in its focus and its form. It comprises essays, interviews, and cartoons that analyse and critique issues related to cartooning in the African continent especially in respect to sociopolitical trends, censorship, and use of new technologies. Acclaimed African cartoonists including Zapiro (South Africa), Gado (Kenya), and Asukwo (Nigeria) contribute to this volume alongside scholars as they contemplate the role of cartooning in speaking truth to power.

The paucity of special volumes that exclusively focus on African stand-up comedy has begun to change as, more recently, a sprinkle of publications has begun to emerge spotlighting stand-up comedy or performed jokes in the continent. Among these new publications is Izuu Nwankwo's edited collection, *Stand-up Comedy in Africa: Humour in Popular Languages and Media* (2022),[2] Ignatius Chukwuma's edited volume, *Joke-Performance in Africa: Media, Mode and Meaning* (2018), and to some extent, the new issue of *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (Volume 34, 2022 - Issue 2).[3] While Nwankwo's volume has a commendable continental appeal in its singular focus on stand-up comedy as a unique popular art form different from humour as a general category, Chukwuma's features more of "visual depictions of humor in Africa […] than theatrical or textual offerings" (Adamu 2020, E4) which this special issue of *Nokoko* showcases. *Joke-Performance in Africa* also touches on jokes performed on the streets, as in the taunts or roasts performed by urban youths in Kenya, where the audience actively participates. Its strength lies in its geographical and thematic broadness, featuring four authors from Nigeria, four from Kenya, three from Egypt, and others from Malawi, Morocco, and Zambia. In their own way, the contributors examine how comedians manipulate various media to perform sociopolitical critique. The uniqueness of the volume is that it foregrounds the centrality of digital media in the making, packaging, and distribution of jokes in postcolonial Africa.

In 2018, the *European Journal of Humour Research* published a special issue on Nigerian Humor. Edited by Ibukun Filani, this special edition contains a dozen scholarly articles from Nigerian scholars. Three of the articles focus on stand-up comedy, while others focus on humour in memes and digital comedy skits, radio programmes, poetry, and plays. As in the earlier discussed book edited by Chukwuma, the volume edited by Filani also credits

[2] Also see Nwankwo's monograph, *Yabbing and Wording: The artistry of Nigerian stand-up comedy*. NISC (Pty) Ltd., 2022.
[3] There are only four essays in a section of this issue of the journal focusing on Humour and Stand-Up Comedy.

new media for transforming humour as it is understood and engaged with in society. More importantly, as Filani states in the introduction, "the papers in the volume conceive humour as an enterprise with a serious social end" (Filani 2018, 6).[4]

# Recalibrating the origin of stand-up comedy

Generally, scholars often trace the origins of stand-up comedy to diverse times, historical eras, and civilizations namely, the Western (vaudeville, burlesque), the Indian (Chakyar kooto), and more. Yet, the case can be made—and indeed needs to be made—that stand-up comedy originated from African slaves who used comedic performances to survive the Middle Passage and horrific servitude in the New World. This theory has been elucidated in personal conversations with me by Ali Baba (Atunyota Alleluia Aporobomeeriere), Nigeria's ingenious ace comedian and shrewd showbiz impresario. Acclaimed British journalist, historian, documentarist, and prolific author, Basil Davidson (1961), forcefully lays the foundation for such an appreciation of the socio-cultural influence of Black slaves on the New World as he authoritatively emphasizes their contributions thus:

> No fewer than a million African slaves laboured in the Brazilian sugar plantations towards the end of the eighteenth century; but as well as providing field work [they] also provided the arts and crafts and the foundations of Brazilian industry. […] Far from showing 'passive obedience' they rebelled time and again. They built free republics of their own. They added culture to the cultures of Europe and of aboriginal South America, for along with their strength and experience they had brought with them their songs and superstitions and their gods. (21)

It is against this backdrop that Black comedic performances and aesthetics were carried over to the Western world, arguably influencing "Blackface minstrelsy" which dates back to as early as the Middle Ages[5] and has been described as "a troublesome topic in popular culture studies" (Mahar 1991, n.p.). This tradition, infamous for its perpetuation of racial stereotyping of Black people, morphed into what came to be known as "Ethiopian Delineators." Grosvenor and Toll (2019) provide more insight into our thesis on the Black slaves' origins of stand-up comedy:

> Between-the-act performers drew heavily on American folklore and folk song, so it was no surprise that the unique culture of black Americans became a regular feature of these brief skits. The only surprise might have been that the performers were white men wearing burnt-cork make-up. But before the Civil War, blacks were rarely allowed on the popular stage, just as they were rarely allowed in white hotels, restaurants, courthouses, or cemeteries.
>
> As early as the 1820's, some white performers specialized in what they called "Ethiopian delineation." The Ethiopian delineators were entertainers, not anthropologists, of course, and they had no particular interest in the authenticity of their performances. But they had an insatiable appetite for fresh black material that could be shaped into popular stage acts…
>
> Many blackface performers in the 1830's did primitive fieldwork among black people. Billy Whillock, who toured the South with circuses in the 1830's, would "steal off to some negro hut to hear the darkies sing and see them dance, taking a jug of whisky to make things merrier." Ben Cotton, another blackface star, also recalled studying black culture at its source: "I used to sit with them in front of their cabins, and we would start the banjo twanging, and their voices would ring out in the quiet night air in their weird melodies." Similarly, E. P. Christy, later the leader of the famous Christy Minstrels, was fascinated with the "queer words and simple but expressive melodies" he heard from black dock workers in New Orleans.

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[4] Akin to this, in 2019, Izuu Nwankwo and Nkatha Kabira co-chaired a panel titled, *Limits and Prospects of African Humour* at the 8th European Conference on African Studies, Edinburgh. The papers are set to be published as a special issue in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*. But only a few of the papers presented in the conference focused on stand-up comedy.

[5] The *www.encyclopedia.com* defines "Blackface, which dates back to as early as the Middle Ages," as "the theater performance practice of wearing soot, cosmetics, paint, or burnt cork to blacken the face. In medieval and Renaissance English theatre, blacking up was prevalent in religious cycles and morality plays, where it was used to represent evil, badness, or damnation." Retrieved from https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/blackface.

> Minstrel humor ranged from skits to one-liners, from slapstick to riddles… minstrels were beginning to introduce the rapid-fire humor of the city, the humor later perfected in vaudeville, burlesque, and radio. (n.p.)

Over time, this tradition metamorphosed into contemporary American stand-up comedy which has influenced the genre in the rest of world including Africa, especially against the backdrop of globalization. But despite the enormous transformation of stand-up comedy from the original African slaves' roots, "the ghost of the minstrel still stalks the American stage," to appropriate Foster and Bramley (2016, n.p.).[6]

Yet, it is also important to acknowledge the influence of globalization and sociopolitical dynamics of individual countries in the development of stand-up comedy in Africa. The American entertainment industry grew exponentially from the 1960s, and by the 1980s and 1990s American music, movies and shows were circulating in virtually all parts of the globe. But audiences from Brazil to India were interpreting these cultural materials through the lens of their own social realities. Soon, the aesthetic style and technologies used in producing and distributing these materials were adopted and localized by various peoples. To buttress these inherent connections, the movie industry that developed in India became known as Bollywood and its counterpart in Nigeria was tagged Nollywood.

In the case of South Africa, as the apartheid regime was giving way to majority rule in the mid-90s, stand-up comedy gained currency in urban areas such as Johannesburg and Cape Town.

As the South Africa comedienne Tracy Klass states, "Stand up comedy was not big in South Africa until the late 90s early 2000. […] The comedy circuit kicked off in Cape Town with the launch of the CCC (The Cape Comedy Collective) run by Mark Sampson and Sam Pearce. An article launching the collective appeared around March 1999 entitled 'Do you think you are funny?'"[7] By the late 90s and early 2000s, Black stand-up comedians such as David Kau and Loyiso Gola were using their platforms to resurrect bitter memories of apartheid and to condemn its legacies. Inequality, steep class divisions, government corruption, and hardship in townships became some of their most popular comedic material (Sierlis 2011). Other eminent South African comedians include Kagiso Ledega, Tumi Morake, Gilda Blacher, Nik Rabinowitz, Stuart Taylor, Riaad Moosa, Kurt Schoonraad, Conrad Koch (Chester Missing), Dave Levinsohn, Mel Jones, John Vlisman, and Mark Lottering—many of whom were inspired by Pieter Dirk-Uys who used humour and irony in his One Man Shows to "highlight the hypocrisy and corruption that were part of South Africa's daily life under apartheid."[8]

In many East African countries such as Uganda and Kenya, stand-up comedy also grew from within as an extension of various indigenous cultural expressions, while being enhanced by the socio-political exchange fostered by an increasingly global cultural economy. Examples from Uganda include the premiere hit show, Pablo Live, produced by Uganda's king of comedy, Pablo (Ken Kimuli), and Anne Kansiime's comedy show, Don't mess with Kansiime. Stand-up comedy has grown as well in other African countries such as Egypt where the leading figures include Ali Quandil, Noha Kato, Omar Ramzi (White Sudani), and Ahmed Ahmed. Today, the five African countries highlighted in this introduction, and which represent West Africa, East Africa, Southern Africa, and East Africa—Nigeria, Guinea, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, and Egypt—feature significantly in the stand-up comedy landscape of the continent. If stand-up comedy is hinged on culture and sociality as highlighted in this introduction, and if culture and

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[6] It also worth noting that the origin of clowning, which also informs stand-up comedy, has been traced to "5,000 years ago when ancient Egyptian royals kept African pygmies, known as Dangas, for their amusement" (Bibbs 2019, n.p.). Rebecca Bibbs further states that "By the early 20th century in the United States, the clown figure was transformed into a tramp or hobo, made famous by the emerging art of motion picture and featuring Vincennes native Red Skelton, Charly Chaplin, Emmett Kelly and Buster Keaton." (n.p.).

[7] Tracy Klass, Personal Interview. November 2, 2016.

[8] See "One Man Shows: the black and white years." (n.d.) Retrieved from http://pdu.co.za/OneManShows.html (n.p.)

politics are intertwined in their everyday manifestations in society, then stand-up comedy's relationship with the political must not be overlooked.[9]

# Stand-up comedy, politics and cultural economy

In this volume, Mohamed Saliou Camara and Chikezirim Nwoke's articles focus on Guinea and Nigeria, respectively, exploring how comedians speak truth to power. African comedians creatively utilize their platforms to call out government corruption and reject social injury on various scales. But such engagement comes with a price in some countries. In 2020, a four-person comedy group known as Bizonto was arrested after it released a comedy skit ridiculing the Guinean government. Trevor Noah of South Africa, I Go Dye (Francis Agoda) of Nigeria, and Mmamito of Kenya are some comedians who are unafraid to include political criticism in their routines. Sometimes, through dramalogue and cues, they navigate issues of race and international geopolitics; sometimes it is ethnicity and national sociopolitics, and at other times it is the struggles of everyday existence. African comedians are partakers in the public sphere or alternative spaces where citizens oppose power structures that delineate society. Yet, comedy is serious business and comedians are not exempt from capitalistic notions of wealth creation and accumulation. Many comedians are engaged by the elite, such as government officials and big corporations, for shows, advertisement, and endorsements. A case in point is MC Tagwaye who became popular online for mimicking the president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. Tagwaye has since been invited to perform in front of the president and other elites. His unique style of stand-up comedy—dressing up like and mimicking the president—has earned him government association, including marrying the daughter of the president's aide in 2020.

Beyond the intervention of Africa's stand-up comedians in the public sphere through the use of political humour, conceiving humour as an enterprise encourages us to: a) focus on the "soft power" and economic significance of Africa's culture and creative industries (CCI)—which includes the stand-up comedy sector; and b) recall The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) global studies which "issued two definitive reports in 2008 and 2010 highlighting the contribution of the creative industries across the globe" (Van Graan 2014, n.p.). However, Van Graan laments that: "As with minerals and other commodities, Africa is rich in talent and creativity. But…most countries lack the infrastructure and expertise to beneficiate (sic) this talent and creativity into sustainable, let alone profitable enterprises. As a consequence, the talent drain – like the brain drain – from Africa means that many countries in Europe and North America benefit more economically from African artists than do these artists' countries" (Ibid.) However, Van Graan recognizes Nigeria's film industry, Nollywood, as one of the significant exceptions as it is "the second-largest provider of work in Nigeria (after agriculture) and produces about 50 movies per week with an average of 130 people employed per movie" (Ibid.). In a related article, Neil Ford (2021) states that:

> African creative industries make a sizeable contribution to total economic activity and are worth about $20-23bn in annual exports, but this is still equivalent to just 1% of the industry's global total. The continent has as many great stories to tell and cultural styles to share as any other part of the world, yet the financial and technical infrastructure to bring this about is often lacking. (n.p.)[10]

[9] For a fuller discussion of the "the potential of humour as a political force" see Rehak & Trnka's enlightening book, *The Politics of Joking* (2019). Also see Nwankwo (2022) for a more continental discourse of stand-up comedy in Africa.

[10] For more on African creative industries significant contribution to the economy, see the *Music in Africa* article, "Creative industries fuel global economy and provide 29.5 million jobs," which concludes that: **"**Today, African societies contain cultural riches that are bubbling up to embrace the opportunities offered by new technologies and commercial markets. Film production and viewing are now driving employment growth in the CCI, with striking successes such as the rise of Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, which is now reckoned to directly employ 300,000 people. Yet the African market is poorly structured and cultural goods are largely provided through the so-called 'informal economy', for example unofficial music performances, which is a significant part of the local cultural scene and a reservoir of jobs, employing some 547,500 people

Although the focus is often on film and Nollywood as a success story, music and stand-up comedy have also boosted the cultural ecosystem locally and internationally, with Nigerian artists winning international awards and prizes. In some cases, the different genres of the arts—film, music, and comedy—meld into a complex whole that exemplifies the commodification of humour through memoirs (Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood,* 2016; Julius Agwu's *Jokes Apart,* 2013; Okey Bakassi's *The Memoirs of an African Comedian,* 2019); numerous CDs and DVDs. Notable examples of live stand-up comedy shows packaged for electronic dissemination include Nigeria's *Night of Thousand Laughs* series, and content streaming in "seasons" such as Funke Akindele's *Jenifa's Diary,* and more recently, Ali Baba's development of a television station branded XQZMOITV. Also noteworthy are the Kenyan television shows referred to above, the South African comedy clubs which Tracy Klass discusses in my interview with her, and the comedy films such as AY's (Ayo Makun) *A Trip to Jamaica,* and *30 Days in Atlanta* which is touted by Wikipedia as the "highest grossing film of all time in Nigerian cinemas."[11]

Apart from these examples, the grand comedy shows popularized by Ali Baba with high ticket tables have also become part of the show business landscape and cultural calendar. Tunji Adegbite, a strategy, transformation and supply chain consultant, as well as the founder of a business and market research start-up, *Naspire*, offers insight into the business in his short but powerful *LinkedIn* piece, "Nigeria's Comedy Industry – Joking into Billions."[12] Citing Ayakoroma's (2017) seminal essay on the rise of contemporary stand-up comedy in Nigeria, and echoing Lynda Chinenye Ambrose's account in her essay in this volume, Adegbite credits Ali Baba's registration of his company in 1993 and buying "billboard spaces on three prestigious streets in Lagos Central Business District that read 'Ali Baba – Being Funny is Serious Business.'" He further states that Ali Baba's "infusing [of] a professional toga into his art" led to some of "the most transformative actions in the industry" (Ibid.) Then, alluding to various sources, Adegbite declares:

> Comedians were now being perceived as professionals; humourpreneurs who were demanding higher pay and receiving over 500 million Naira in endorsements and contracts both locally and internationally from brands like Globacom, MTN, Virgin Atlantic, Indomie, and Coca Cola. [….] Comedians were and still are increasing their exposure by hosting independent comedy shows and comedy competitions in Nigeria and abroad. Examples include Opa William's *Nite* (sic) *of a Thousand Laughs*, Basketmouth's *Uncensored* (which brings in almost N100 million annually (Vanguard, 2014)), AY's *Open Mic Competition* and Ali Baba's *Spontaneity Comedy Talent Hunt* & *January 1st* event. In addition, comedians are also taking their exposure and growth into their own hands by producing Skits and making it available to the general public through social media Today, Instagram comedians such as Lasisi Elenu (1.9m followers), Maraji (1.1m followers), Woli Agba (1.9m followers), MC Lively (1m followers) are smiling to the bank largely by riding on the back of their social media following. These new comedians have a higher social media following than the earlier generation comedians and can stand on their own without the hand-holding of veterans.[13]

The various forms of patronage and sponsorship enjoyed by privileged stand-up comedians in Nigeria became more evident in the early 2000s. The Y2K decade witnessed a surge in brand-sponsored comedy events with audiences addressed directly by businesses like British American Tobacco (BAT) Ltd. where above-the-line advertising was no longer lawful for cigarette brands. Among the spectacular stand-up comedy events of the era were

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and generating US$4.2bn in revenues." (*Music in Africa* 2015). Retrieved from https://www.musicinafrica.net/magazine/creative-industries-fuel-global-economy-and-provide-295-million-jobs)

[11] See *30 Days in Atlanta.* Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/30_Days_in_Atlanta

[12] Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/nigerias-comedy-industry-joking-billions-mba-acca-mcips-

[13] There is also the *Ali Baba Seriously* series on Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) which has run into over 100 episodes. See example here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WbbTsL-41o Importantly, Many Uzonitsha, arguably Nigeria's pioneer comedienne, contends in a personal interview with me that The Charly Boy Show, the television show by the multi-talented maverick artiste Charles Oputa (a.k.a. Charly Boy), played a pivotal role in the emergence of contemporary comedy shows in Nigeria. According to Uzonitsha, "The Charly Boy Show had different segments but people always remember the Candid Camera segment where people were subjected to gags on the street. I had a chance of meeting with Charly Boy and told him I could do better and he sent me out and the rest is history."

Basketmouth's *Laffs & Times* and Opa Williams' *Night of a Thousand Laughs* series. There were also cultural festivals such as the Obanta Festival in Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, with stand-up comedy performances delivered by Gbenga Adeyinka III and other comedians of the time. The high-octane festival was sponsored by the foremost indigenous telecommunications company, Globacom, and it was well-televised using the brand's budget.

The corporatization of African stand-up comedians is not limited to Nigeria. In Uganda, Queen of African comedy, Anne Kanssime has enjoyed similar patronage. Only recently, she was made a brand ambassador for Chipper Cash, a cross-border money transfer platform. Other endorsements she had enjoyed include Old Mutual Kenya, Multichoice, and Standard Chartered Bank. As Danson Sylvester Kahyana, a contributor to this special issue states in a different article ("The Afterlife of Ugandan Stand-up Comedy…"), "[a]s one of Uganda's most popular humorists, Kansiime's appointment by these multinationals through respective contracts is not surprising" (2022: 181).

The commodification of comedy by "humourpreneurs" has been implicated in the link between certain artists and predatory politicians infamous for corrupt leadership. However, without necessarily defending the lure of lucre, what Pype observes in her analysis of the funerary comedians in Kinshasha seems to define the cultural economy of most African stand-up comedians. According to Pype,

> The masolo in the grimness of their stories, they also show that even the poor and the disabled need to be cunning and wise. So, in contrast to Ghanaian stand-up comedians […], the jokers […] are not preachers of urban morality; they do not want to transmit an ideology; rather, they merely want to earn quick money by using their own street intelligence, voice and body in a space made available by the city's wealthy. (472)

Okey Bakassi canvasses a similar position in my interview with him as he contends that "the stand-up comedian does not necessarily need to discriminate against his clients or long-term friends because of their corrupt political or social profile. Loyalty to friendship seems to supersede any moral considerations in the public imagination". The relationship between the work of the socially conscious stand-up comedian, ethics or morality, and the pursuit of social justice and the common good is a complex one, and Adeshina Afolayan offers a compelling philosophical examination of the subject in his essay in this volume, "Comedy on the Cusp of Plurality: Gbenga Adeboye and the Context of Social Critique in Nigeria".

Prominent African comedians interviewed for my project on African stand-up comedy present a dichotomy: these performers embrace the social criticism associated with their work as stand-up comedians, but shy away from detailed discussions about money and business. For example, I asked Anne Kansiime of Uganda: "How much do you charge for comic live shows, emceeing, brand sponsorship, etc. Is the cultural economy of stand-up comedy profitable enough to make it your sole business? How much are you worth and how much—estimates only—would you say that stand-up comedy business in Uganda is worth?"

She responded:

> Worth? Aaah that job is for *Forbes* and all the rating systems in the world... [laughs]...All I can say is that I not only have what I need but also what I want, and God has done that for me through comedy. So, surely, it can be a sole source of income, though I must add that it takes time to get to that point, and in Uganda, comedians are still working hard and sometimes it takes getting known even outside Uganda in order to get more from comedy.[14]

Richard Mofe-Damijo, celebrated actor and producer of the hit stand-up comedy show, *Made in Warri*, sees the emergence of comic clubs and comic shows and the proliferation of comic CDs/DVDs and other commercial products as "expanding the

[14] Kansiimi, Personal Interview. November 25, 2016.

brand," adding that "when more people get into an industry, enterprise begins to grow and people begin to look for niche areas to expand it and make more money. And that's exactly what is happening".[15] Asked if the success on stage often translates to success in the digital format as suggested by his having the *Made in Warri* series on YouTube, Mofe-Damijo responded: "I have seen *Made in Warri* too on YouTube. I own the right, but I don't get a dime from it. With piracy, it doesn't translate. I am still looking at ways on how to shut down some of those websites that are doing those things" (Ibid.). He further asserts that when they started the series, they "didn't reckon how much the internet age would affect all of us either positively or negatively". He affirms that "Some of us are beginning to look for ways to harness all of that now and own our intellectual properties back…I have some people that I am speaking with to look at all of those things in a bid to shutting down some of those sites" (Ibid.).

Okey Bakassi complements Mofe-Damijo's position on the boom in the humour business across Africa and the role of globalization and social media in its commodification. According to Bakassi:

> The truth is that the advancement of social media has popularized comedy and has helped market comedy. What it has also done too is that it has posed a greater challenge to the practitioners. It has kept them on their toes and by so doing it has made you more creative.
>
> If you must survive in the business today, you must be more creative because once you release any material, it goes viral. While the practitioners are complaining, is because social media today does not allow you reap total benefit of your creativity and effort. If it was a situation where no matter who copies it or uses it, it will benefit you or put money in your pocket, or you have credit to it and have ownership of my intellectual property, it wouldn't be a problem. You have to deal with scavengers, in ways that you don't like. Technology helps everybody but, in this case, it's not working to our advantage. (n.p.)

While many stand-up comedians have had to deal with the "scavengers" Bakassi calls out, including some budding or wannabe comics who "steal" original jokes for their own performances, the positive values of globalization and the boom in stand-up comedy that it has instigated seem to supersede its negative consequences. Uganda's Cotilda Inapo reinforces the centrality of information communication technology to the success of stand-up comedy in Africa: "Yes there is a boom and technology has definitely contributed because one no longer has to wait until a live comedy show in order to laugh," she stressed, adding: "We are always sharing any funny content we find online with friends and family, and this has also pushed a good number of comedy brands."[16] Inapo then goes beyond the role of technology in the comedy boom to acknowledge what some might see as a positive transnational ring to colonization and the language question. According to Inapo, "It is comedy's time now more than ever before and as much as we hate the colonial masters, the languages they left behind that became our national languages have helped overcome the language diversity for us."[17]

# Synopsis of the essays

The essays in this collection indeed affirm Inapo's declaration that "it is comedy's time" in Africa. The essays offer detailed analysis of the work of some A-list comedians. This special issue aims to expand the conversation on stand-up comedy in Africa; to unpack the contested origin of stand-up comedy in the region; to examine the dynamics and stylistics of its performance; and to highlight the politics and cultural economy that underpin it production and circulation. The essays in this volume are thematically related, yet unique

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[15] Mofe-Damijo, Personal interview, October 28, 2016.
[16] Personal interview, November 25, 2016.
[17] Although Nigeria's (Warri) Pidgin is the language of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, there is no denying the point advanced by Inapo that next to technology which has provided multiple avenues for the production and consumption of comedy, the use of more widely spoken colonial languages has aided the circulation of comedic acts across Africa, its diasporas, and the world.

in the various approaches taken by their contributors. Geographically, the essays cover stand-up comedy in Nigeria, Uganda, Guinea, and the African diaspora in Canada. The special issue also offers essays written from philosophical and discourse analysis approaches that are rare in the study of African stand-up comedy.

An unfortunate gap in the volume is the absence of essays focusing on comediennes or female comedians. This gap is not only reflected in many other studies of contemporary African stand-up comedy but raises questions about gender and the marginalization of women in the field.[18] As Okadigwe and El Sawy (2022) boldly aver, "[e]ven with the advances made in both Egypt and Nigeria since the emergence of professional stand-up acts, women continue to be the subject of jokes but hardly the ones behind the microphone" (109). Regrettably, two draft essays on leading African comediennes did not make it into this volume due to circumstances beyond our control. However, to compensate for the gap, I have included in this special issue, excerpts from my original interviews with four notable African comediennes addressing the gender question—Anne Kansiimi and Cotilda Inapo of Uganda, Tracy Klass of South Africa, and Mandy Uzonitsha of Nigeria. The excerpts are published as Appendix to the issue with the caption "What has gender got to do with African comedy and stand-up acts?"

The opening essay in this volume by James Tar Tsaaior foregrounds the complex overlapping "between laughter/humor and the more serious pathologies of the human condition." Though it may seem illogical that stand-up comedy wades into the domain of serious national issues, such as governance and ethno-politics, Tsaaior notes that the critical propensity of humour allows for the subversion of assumed binaries and boundaries. His primary argument is that "stand-up comedy possesses the incredible capacity to name, claim but also blame and shame Nigerian ethno-cultures in its politics of representation."

Doyin Aguoru's essay, "From Alarinjo to Oniduro: Stand-up Comedy as a Neo-Cultural Expression" traces how contemporary stand-up comedy in Nigeria has been influenced by indigenous traditions, notably the Alarinjo theatre of the Yoruba. Aguoru contends that the genre, which is popular in Nigeria today as a dynamic creative art form, metamorphosed from ancient humorous performers or jesters in palaces or courts across diverse African ethnic groups, the comic performances inherent in mask dramaturgy and, more recently, the travelling theatre of the Yoruba. This genealogical analysis helps unravel the peculiarity of this genre as an art that developed from within. The analysis also allows us to appreciate the author's observation that by "navigating through times and themes by eclectic neo-cultural modifications, the current form has achieved an intercultural balance to the extent that a new culture has emerged." Aguoru adds that: "Critically chronicling professional contexts of humour in Nigeria, the trends reveal features of traditional forms of comedy that are sustained as well as contemporary and syncretic forms that have emerged."

Adeshina Afolayan's focus on Gbenga Adeboye, a multi-talented Nigerian artist who died in 2003 at the age of 56, connects more to the Alarinjo and traditional oral aesthetics than to the contemporary stand-up comedians that Adeboye antedated. In this essay, Afolayan teases out the difference between "the comic art of Adeboye and his critical oeuvre," and makes a case for what he calls "the comic-critical efforts of Adeboye that enabled him to speak truth to power and its misuse in Nigeria." However, Afolayan also acknowledges the irony that "Gbenga Adeboye's subaltern position constitutes a critical limitation of his significance as a critic of the Nigerian predicament […] because while he committed his entire comic-critical art to understanding Nigeria's plural challenge, he was also caught up in the ethnic chauvinism that was at the very heart of that unruly plurality." A particularly striking aspect of Afolayan's essay is what happens when a philosopher

[18] Notably, Zoe Parker (2002) examines reasons for "the relative scarcity of women stand-up comedians in post-1994 South Africa", how the female comedians who perform present themselves, and "the obstacles they encounter when doing so" (8).

embraces cultural studies: The essay is easily a rare philosophical reading of the corpus of an African stand-up comedian.

Mohamed Saliou Camara reveals in his essay how stand-up comedy works at the intersection of creativity, pedagogy, political empowerment, and sociocultural criticism. Through a critical examination of three comedians in Guinea whose work defy hegemonic structures and technical barriers to gain grassroots popularity and acceptance, Camara affirms the tendency of arts to appeal to ordinary people while helping them to make sense of their lives and of society. Furthermore, the author explores how government censorship creates alternative spaces—how government's delegitimization of oppositional expressions encourages popular resistance and subversion.

Danson Sylvester Kahyana's contribution evaluates comedy performances in buses by hawkers of medicinal products as configurations of stage-performed stand-up comedy in Uganda. Though sited in different locations, both styles employ similar strategies. Kahyana asks: What does the use of humour enables these vendors to achieve as they ride on the buses to sell their wares? In what ways do passengers respond to these jokes and what key lessons can we draw from them? His close reading of these jokes reveals the often-ignored relationship between humour and public health. He further interrogates the interrelated nature of such performances—how the medicine hawker (the performer) and other passengers (the audience), work together creating the jokes and putting under the spotlight the conditions.

Humour plays a contradictory role in everyday politics and national imagination. It could be used to confront or challenge the state. At the same time, it could be employed by the government or its agents to infiltrate and influence public opinion. Humour could promote mobilization and popular dissent. Conversely, it can render the serious hilarious, thereby fostering the condoning of social injustice. In his essay examining "police jokes" in Nigeria, Chikezirim Nwoke explores how the content and context of performed jokes on "crime-fighting" inspire paradoxical meanings that directly speak to existential realities and insecurity in the society. Against the backdrop of the #EndSARS protests against police corruption and brutality in Nigeria, he ponders the place of humour in interrogating a police force renowned for perpetuating injustice.

Destiny Idegbekwe's essay titled, "Lexical Cohesion as a Narrative Force in the Jokes of I Go Dye," offers a linguistic analysis of the jokes of I Go Dye, a popular Nigerian comedian. Arguing that lexical cohesion in jokes has been given limited attention in African stand-up comedy, Idegbekwe "investigates lexical connectivity as one of those conditions for the jokes stand-up comedians make to be humorous and meaningful". The author analyzes six joke extracts from I Go Dye's comedy while revealing that "the Joke Entry Phrase (JEP) identified in I Go Dye's jokes is a lexical cohesive device which aims at getting the attention of the audience," among other linguistic functions.

Using the Semantic Script Theory of Humour, Lynda Chinenye Ambrose studies the jokes of Nigerian comedian, Gordons, to understand the linguistic strategy that he employs in his stand-up performance. She argues that Gordons' "idiosyncratic comical constructs are mostly hinged on religious scripts which engage the belief in salvation." In a highly religious society, using Christian references to drive home his points becomes utilitarian. As Ambrose further argues, shared ideologies between performers and audiences enable the construction and interpretation of humour within a specific

As stand-up comedy has become a channel for Africans at home to make sense of their societies, critically appraise politics and governance, and challenge societal norms, Africans in the diaspora deploy this artistic form as a tool for identity formation and as a coping mechanism in the face of distress associated with mobility and dislocation. Eyitayo Aloh's article, "Standing Up, Talking Back: Stand-up Comedy, African Immigrants and Belonging in Canada," explores how stand-up comedy has become an opportunity for African immigrants in Canada to perform their identity as immigrants, negotiate the dynamics of belonging, reject stereotypes and participate in conversations that affect them.

In so doing, the African immigrants participate in what Sunday and Filani (2017) have already noted about Nigerian stand-up comedians: they "joke with culture by manipulating shared cultural representations, distorting collective knowledge, manipulating stereotypes and projecting personal beliefs" (97).[19]

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The evolution of humour, not just stand-up comedy, in the modern popular culture context is phenomenal. Comedy is meant to induce laughter, and it refers to any discourse or work that aims to be humorous or amuse an audience. With the rise in popularity of social media, comedic videos and 'memes' may be considered by some as the preserve of "the dumbest generation" (Bauerlein 2009, 2022) or less intelligent than their predecessors because they do not seem to be "complex" or consciously developed with the aim of comedy.

An internet 'meme' is a catchphrase, concept, or piece of media that spreads from person to person through the internet or by word of mouth. The rise of this genre of media has reshaped how comedy is created and disseminated. Jokes and memes tend to go 'viral' or gain popularity rapidly due to the instantaneous nature of social media platforms. Memes are shared as videos, hashtags, GIFs, images, hyperlinks, and phrases. Moradewun Adejumobi recognizes the centrality of such new media to the production and circulation of humour in stating that "the implications of recent developments in the media industries in Nigeria for our understanding of the relationship between live performance, theatricality, and ethics in societies experiencing increased engagement with media industries and technologies."[20]

What is remarkably interesting is that the humour discourse for millennials and Generation Z has taken shape in a much more diverse manner than is usually discussed or understood in the context of classic genres. For example, as this journal issue attests, attention is paid more to "traditional" forms of media such as stand-up comedy shows. At the global level, stand-up comedians such as Bo Burnham, Nicole Byer, John Mulaney, Taylor Tomlinson, Gabriel Iglesias, and Trevor Noah are admired by millennials. However, the platform through which the jokes are spread has transformed. Less attention seems to be paid to their physical shows; videos and images are now the means of transmission, with YouTube videos being shared and cherished between friends and families featuring these comedians. Furthermore, humour discourse has also evolved due to memes to feature many metaphors and implications that may be considered by many to be almost the equivalent of an enormous "inside joke" or reflective of the unique contours of Gen Z and Gen Alpha digital humour. As Pype (2015) notes, echoing Appadurai, "cultural forms travel more than ever along transnational channels, generating new vernacular forms coexisting or competing with local variations" (459). A catchphrase or clever joke in a YouTube video may become a viral internet phenomenon within days or even hours. This then gives way to the rising remix or mash culture—an era in which the idea is combined or altered with other material to create a new product. For example, a video shared on Twitter and Snapchat on February 15, 2016, garnered thousands of views and shares in days. By February 23, 2016, "Damn, Daniel!" had been viewed over 45 million times. The video features then14-year-old Daniel Lara being filmed by his friend, Josh. The video follows Daniel in what seems to be the course of a week, with the narrator complimenting his outfits. Josh—the voice behind the camera—is heard exclaiming, "Damn, Daniel! Back at it again with the white Vans [a style of footwear]!" What seems to

[19] It is pertinent to emphasize, as Martin and Ford (2018) have done, that "Humor is a universal human activity that most people experience many times over the course of a typical day and in all sorts of social contexts. At the same time, there are obviously important cultural influences on the way humor is used and the situations that are considered appropriate for laughter" (30).

[20] There is growing scholarship on the various ways youthful netizens in Africa and the diaspora exercise agency on social media, including the performance of humour (Otiono 2014, Yeku 2016, and Adesanmi 2019).

be an amiable video between two friends has been shared thousands of times on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, with other teenagers making their own versions of the video. In fact, Daniel and Josh were invited to the *Ellen DeGeneres Show* and white Vans sold in record numbers that year. The "original" pair of white Vans shoes was priced at $300,000 USD on eBay (Jone 2016, n.p.).

Indeed, humour discourse is expensive and complex. These viral sensations spread across media platforms, growing into internet phenomena that invade and (re)shape popular culture and everyday life. Modern comedy is not outright or explicit in its punchlines. There is exclusivity to jokes, and the current online humour discourse is reliant on understanding the origin and meaning behind viral sensations. It is no wonder that adults unfamiliar with the process whereby a meme gains popularity may be scratching their heads in wonder. What makes these short videos, trends, and catchphrases so funny? The answer may lie in the ability to share a joke with millions of people around the world, and to collectively understand the punchline—even if the generation before you is mystified. As Barber (2007) rightly states, "[e]mergent forms and emergent constituencies come into being in response to each other" (138).

# Conclusion

This special issue explores how stand-up comedy offers insights into how such "[e]mergent forms and emergent constituencies come into being in response to each other" (Ibid.). It also provides insights into shifting notions of identity and politics, as well as into the relationship between citizens, state, and civil society. Contributors have drawn from interdisciplinary theories of humour in folklore, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, cultural and literary studies to illuminate the themes, tropes, language, discursive styles, and performative genres that have continued to characterize African humour. The journal issue also delves into the politics of representation that continue to engender the experiences of African humourists and their audiences in poignant ways. The essays engage in close readings of stand-up comedy and comedians as well as the spin-offs on social media. Significantly, therefore, this special issue aims to enable scholars, critics, artists, and popular consumers of the performative genre to gain new insights into the following areas of interest: (i) comedians and their audiences as co-producers of meaning; (ii) African urban comedy clubs/shows as communal forums; (iii) stylistic and rhetorical strategies deployed by stand-up comedians to articulate the African experience; (iv) comedians as members of a community of neo-oral performers with shared assumptions and specific rules of engagement; (v) and finally, orality, globalization, and the circulation of African humour in the diaspora.

With the proliferation of digital technology on smart devices, stand-up comedy partly shifted to alternative avenues online. The performer's character, the comedic content and aesthetics have also undergone much creative transformation. From the reinterpretation of the old Akpos jokes in cartoon form as Tegwolo, the Champion of Warri,[21] to the enactment of child humour as innocent wisdom by the mononymous Emmanuella and the MacAngel series, and the activist skits of Mr. Macaroni (Debo Adedayo), many popular YouTube channels (and other social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok) are now available as endless sources of comedic infotainment. Other Nigerian online comedy content creators and influencers worth noting are: Lasisi Elenu (Nosa Afolabi), Broda Shaggi (Samuel Animashaun Perry), Chief Imo (Longinus Anokwute), Mc3310 or Sarkin Dariya—Hausa words for King of Laughter (Kenneth Ogwuche); and Insidelife411 TV (Uche Stanley Orji or Papa Ifeanyi)—unique for his use of Igbo language and its Homer Simpson look-alike and eponymous protagonist, Papa Ifeanyi. Against this emerging online performative and transformative backdrop, it can be argued that given the

[21] For samples, see "Top 10 Tegwolo Videos Of 2021" on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsuDw09FEtw

increasing popularity of "Shorts"[22] as a genre of online performance with comedy at the core, we may be witnessing a reincarnation of Africa's traditional court griots as online storytellers with digital archives for a far more tech savvy generation.

Although the variegated and incisive articles collected in this special issue do not necessarily address the emerging online comedic culture discussed in the preceding subsection, they provide a compelling view of the field from the stand-up comedy perspective. The importance of the volume rests on its expansion of our understanding ofthe origins, aesthetics, politics, and cultural economy of African stand-up comedy. It also rests on its unprecedented featuring of excerpts from exclusive interviews with leading African comedians and comedy show promoters such as Richard Mofe-Damijo, and its promotion of a cultural form that spotlights the capacity of comedians to make us laugh in a world brimming with political brigandage, terrorism, wars, and other depressing socio-political communal and individual tragedies. On this note, I find soothing the words of James Thiep, the South Sudanese comedian who emigrated to the United States in 2001 while fleeing the Second Sudanese Civil War, fitting for closing this introduction: "After going through hell and crying nearly half of my life, I decided to laugh through the other half…I am done crying" (Gallagher 2017, n.p.). Indeed, I wish that we all would be done crying and start laughing with Africa's gifted stand-up comedians. For as the cliché goes, laughter is the best medicine! Or, maybe not quite so, as Kuiper et al (2004) argue in their countercultural article.

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[22] Shorts has been defined by Chris Jaffe, YouTube's VP of Product Management, as "a new short-form video experience for creators and artists who want to shoot short, catchy videos using nothing but their mobile phones." (https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/building-youtube-shorts/ , n.p.). The "shorts" are tantamount to the "vines" that were popular about a decade ago.

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

## James Tar Tsaaior

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

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

# Introduction

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

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

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

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

# Between Laughter and Humor as Comic Categories

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Ethno-cultural Representations in Nigerian Stand-ups

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then Gordons offers this scathing criticism of Nigeria:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> I get something wey de fit person
> Stick to what works for you
> Chain e no dey fit goat; but e dey
> Fit dog; rope no fit dog, but e dey
> Fit goat.
> How dey go talk say make Tuface
> Come 13dvertise for contraceptive?
> I dey wear am? For where?
> People like Tuface suppose
> To 13dvertise for baby pears, pampers
> Towel and other things that can
> Increase the ministry. That is his calling
> (*Gordons Comedy Klinic Ward 1*)

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

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

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

# Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# From *Alarinjo* to *Oniduro*: Stand-up Comedy as a Neo-Cultural Expression in Nigeria

**Adedoyin Aguoru**

> This world is a comedy to those that think,
> a tragedy to those that feel
> — **Horace Walpole**

## Abstract

Comedy (*Awada*), a treasured genre among the itinerant (*Alarinjo*) theatre of the Yoruba, has become a dominant influence on diverse performances in Nigeria. Indeed, it could be argued that contemporary Nigerian stand-up comedy has been largely influenced by the indigenous *Alarinjo* tradition of the Yoruba, which harks back to the turn of the 21st century. Building on Alarinjo *as* a dominant precursor, the Nigerian stand-up comedy platform, in the last two decades has integrated ethnic, linguistic and religious affiliations to become a bastion of recreation transcending the boundaries of the nation-state. Phenomenal though it has been, researchers have hardly traced Nigerian stand-up comedy from its *Alarinjo* antecedents, it being a dominant source and influence, to its eclectic contemporary state. Therefore, this study, through a neo-cultural lens, examines the development from *Awada/Alarinjo* to Stand-up comedy in Nigeria; with a view to providing a credible understanding of the origin, influences, trends, motifs and forms of the fledgling industry. While acknowledging the complexities inherent in empiricism and positivism, the paper charts a genealogical argument for Nigerian stand-up comedy beginning with the performances of unnamed palace satiric entertainers which are traceable to almost every ethnic group in Nigeria, the diverse comic performances inherent in mask dramaturgy, through the 'de-ritualized' itinerant troupes among the Yoruba. It connects this with the professional travelling theatre of the Ogunde Tradition that brought the traditional theatres of Nigeria, the art of Moses Olaiya, and Gbenga Adeboye, the precursor of Yoruba and indeed contemporary stand-up comedy in Nigeria

into limelight. Linking these with aspects of the art of Alli Baba, Gbenga Adeyinka I, Julius Agwu, Basket Mouth, Gandoki, De Don Klint de Drunk and Mohammed Danjuma among others, stand-up comedy-as a contemporary art- is purposively interrogated. Thus, the paper chronicles the sociological, literary and multicultural metamorphosis of this theatrical and comical form.

**Keywords:** Alarinjo, Oniduro, Nigerian stand-up comedy, Neo-culturalism in comedy

# Introduction: Neo-culturalism and stand-up comedy in Nigeria

Stand-up comedy in Nigeria has transcended the distinct divides typical of the Nigerian multi-cultural space. Unlike other brands of art, which essentially depict specific ethnic leanings, stand-up comedy, in Nigeria, has negotiated a detribalised status. As a result, the genre accommodates an overlap of cultural paradigms through the extensive use of multi-culture (Mary Sengstock, 2009:244) without any group claiming ownership. Thus, the emergent stand-up comedy in Nigeria is immune from the puritan and structural narrative of ethnic slice in such a way that all cultures identify with but no culture appropriates the genre to itself. This is archetypical neo-culturalism, which refers to the alteration of the multiple traditions to evolve a post-modern new-tradition of wider claim. Neo-culturalism, according to Bertrand Badie *et al* essentially operates to strike an appropriate intercultural balance in multi-cultural settings (Badie *et al.* 2011). In essence,

> If culture reproduced itself fully from one generation to the next, change would be impossible…There is a realm in which neo-culturalism has no rival: tracing individual behaviour to interpersonal connections. This would apply first to the records of reciprocity and solidarity obligations and the rights and duties assigned to each actor according to his or her place in a vast system of interactions. It would also show that lineages are at the heart of such networks, be they family links, kinship ties, or relationships with neighbours. After all, the unexpected success of "social capital" stems from its ability to focus on networks of interactions among people (Badie *et al.* 2011:15).

At the wake of modernization, and imperialism, culture and popular art have evolved through the vestiges of diverse historical and cultural experiences, which continue to influence the fusion of different forms of art in syncretic fashion. These forms have now attained universal status within the Nigerian milieu. Universality, a principle that strings together recurrent ideas and experiences establishes patterns with archetypical elements such as forms, themes and character types. Ademola Dasylva (2004) describes this as the measure of 'universal trust' that goes beyond the dramatic and that which achieves lasting philosophical significance among cultures. The presence of numerous, yet unique, universal patterns in diverse cultures enables the melding of idea(l)s, which are modified or reinvented deliberately or fortuitously.

Stand-up comedy in Nigeria is largely indebted to this syncretic form of sub-cultures; and within this context, neo-culturalism is a platform of unification that enables a country with complex and diverse ethnic, cultural, religious and political identities to endorse a mixed-matched variety of Stand-up comedy as its new popular theatre. William Mishler and Detlef Pollack (2004) in their political approach to neo-cultural synthesis describe neo-cultural conception as the clarification of the existence of the differences between divergent traditions. To this study, that translates to and accounts, for neo-cultural transition which lends to an evolving performance tradition, valuable syncretism, and eclectics. Asides the fact that neo-cultural synthesis is a contemporary response to modern dynamics, the added value is that parameters for fuller critical studies on the Stand-Up genre will benefit tremendously from the Neo-culturalist theory. Thus, while this paper makes the claim that Nigerian Stand-up comedy has been largely influenced by

professional Yoruba performances and comical forms, it does not impose the Yoruba culture on contemporary Stand-up comedy. Rather, it insists that a middle-ground has been achieved by a neo-cultural blend of features to produce the cultural cocktail now known as Nigeria's brand of Stand-up comedy.

# Chronicling Humour in Nigerian Theatre

It is a global phenomenon for modern theatrical forms to emerge from and be influenced by traditional/indigenous theatre (Ogunbiyi 1981, Ogundeji 2007, Brockette 2011). The critical writings of R. Horton A. Horn, E.O Kofoworola, C.G.B Gidley and several others in Ogunbiyi (1981), accounts for theatrical and dramatic forms within Nigeria: these include the Kalabari, Bori and Hausa and Yakamanci performances respectively. Other traditional forms such as Igbo ritual drama, *Kwag-Hir* of the Tiv, and the Alarinjo, Yoruba Travelling theatre from which this paper takes its bearing, are also documented in Ogunbiyi's encyclopedic work on Nigerian drama and theatre. Indeed, traditional drama has folkloric essence, which it naturally transmits to stand-up comedy. Several writers notably Pakade (2020), Filani (2018), Dore (2018), Filani (2017), Sunday and Filani (2018), King (2014), Nilsen and Nilsen (2000) and Mintz (1998) among others, have defined the scope and elements of stand-up comedy. While Lawrence Mintz has written that "stand-up comedy is arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression," and that it performs "essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society, past and present" (1998:193). Nilsen, AUeen Pace, and Don Nilsen's *The Encyclopedia of 20th Century American Humor* defines stand-up comedy as a post-1960 phenomenon domiciled in 'comedy clubs' where solo performers as well as small groups have platforms to perform and produce recorded versions of these performance for television broadcast (2000:287-291). Other critical perspectives on the significance of comedic performance include the cultural critic, or an unusual anthropologist who comments on day-to-day existence and unravels behavioural patterns that are tacitly or otherwise operating in the society.

Whereas Mintz hopes to expand the humour scholar's engagement of the form by examining stand-up elements in the myriad of cultural forms such as skits, comedy teams, improvisation among others, Ian Brodie (2015) approaches stand-up comedy from a folkloric stance. Stating that stand-up comedy imitates "…the forms of talk that occur in informal, day-to-day, face-to-face communication among intimates, which is the object at the heart of folklore stories" (2015:217), thus providing the institutional history and framework for standup comedy. This is crucial because the daunting task of generating humour, forging intimacy with, and engaging the participation of the audience requires an array of folkloric elements and performance devices.

However folkloric the premise of stand-up comedy is, Ayakoroma's (2013) claim that Nigerian stand-up comedy moved straight from the folkloric role of the village spokesman and ceremonial anchor to television in the early 1970s and 80s, glosses over the existence of comedy as a professional form reaching back to the pre-colonial era. His reference to Mazi Mperempe's 30-minute TV show on Radio Nigeria and Anambra State Television, Enugu as a classical example of early comedy, and declaration of the art of Alleluia Atunyota Akporobomeriere as the start of "serious" comedy in Nigeria are assertions that do not situate Nigerian Stand-up comedy within its proper ambit, particularly the narrative of its evolution. This paper restates the interlinear narrative by chronicling the transition of comedy from tradition to post-modernity.

The detail that the Yoruba have humour and laughter as dominant elements in their performance is underscored by the tenets of *Ifa,* this has been aptly captured by Durotoye Adeleke (2005). Adeleke observes that laughter is an integral part of the social activities of the Yoruba. The role of laughter is perhaps more functional, even philosophical as seen in Adesina Afolayan's essay, Hilarity and the Nigerian Condition

(2013). However, Adedoyin Aguoru shrewdly observed that laughter and moderate reaction to jokes and humour is universally thought to promote health and general wellbeing (Aguoru 2016). Performances and activities that therefore centre on laughter and forms that provoke laughter have become a dominant part of Nigeria's national identity.

The first generation of Yoruba theatre practitioners were court artistes[1], musicians and subsequently the mask dramaturge (*Alarinjo*), who regaled guests with satiric performances at king's courts and elsewhere up till the early parts of the colonial period. Building on the longstanding *Alarinjo* tradition, Nigerian professional theatre took root in the art of veteran Yoruba travelling theatre whose founding practitioners were Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo and Moses Olaiya (Aguoru, 2011; 2012). It should be noted that the second generation of Yoruba theatre practitioners preceded the inauguration of the first television station in Africa, the Western Nigerian Government Broadcasting TV (WNTV), was founded in 1959, even though they eventually benefited tremendously from the coverage of the media.

Further evidence that the second generation of theatre practitioners metamorphosed from traditional Yoruba theatre is the fact that they maintained the tenets of the *Alarinjo* performers, even long after they were featured on TV. By taking advantage of the ease of transportation which came from technological advancement, the second generation professional travelling theatres' itinerancy took Nigerian theatrical forms to international limelight. Today, stand-up comedy in Nigeria not only still alludes to folk as source, pointing out its primordial relevance, it has also adopted travelling with the theatre, a dominant feature of the Ogunde School as its form of mobility. This authenticates the status of *Alarinjo* as a dominant precursor source, whose transcendental influence permeates theatrical forms and times. This is corroborated by Joel Adedeji and Hyginus Ekwuazi (1998) who affirm that the mask dramaturge of the professional traditional drama of the Yoruba, the *Eegun Alare*, playfully referred to as *Alarinjo* emanated from the mask cult. This mask dramaturge had two distinct forms; the spectacle and the revue. The spectacle was performed as a sole mime of mythological dramas enacting the myths of the deities or local heroes whereas the revue was, in their words:

> … a medley. As a comic sketch, music, dancing and singing were its main features. There were three categories of the revue – abstracts, sociological and historical … All the revue masques depended for their effect on 'audience participation'. Their sketches were mainly improvisational and capable of infinite changes their songs were topical and in most cases familiar. The dialogue included jokes and ribaldry, lack of premeditation and any carefully worked out scenario (156).

Nigerian contemporary comedy concerts adopt this format in its totality as its programme features popular choreographers, solo instrumentalists, as well as trendy and trending old and new musicians to intersperse the comic sketches. Similarly, on the itinerant routine of stand-ups Chelsea Peretti (2002) observes that 'comics …are often nomads touring the country up to 300 nights in a year and many comedians are known for a body of dramatic - comic work that often acknowledges this history of comic traditions' (20). Certainly, this universal itinerary of travelling theatres, plays out in many ways in contemporary Nigerian Stand-up comedy. For instance, Noma Pakade (2020) in like fashion observes that Nigerian contemporary Stand-Up comedians encourage their counterparts in Africa to become itinerant thereby enjoy intracontinental exposure and collaboration:

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[1] Court artistes are the different categories of entertainers in Palaces and who predominantly performed for royalty. These artistes are present in palaces across Nigeria and their performances are ethnic specific but do not necessarily have to conform to universal features of theatrical forms of which comedy is one.

> For instance, festivals such as the 2019 One Africa Comedy, hosted in South Africa, facilitated the visibility of artists like Agnes Akite (Uganda) and Eunice Mommite (Kenya), enabling the intracontinental exposure of stand-up comedians. Another example is the AY Comedy Show in Lagos, Nigeria, which hosted South African comedian Thenjiwe Moseley in 2017, Similarly, Nigerian comedian Basket Mouth has hosted several gigs in Nigeria, inviting a variety of African standup comedians, including Celeste Ntuli (Pakade ,2020:2).

Above all the significant comic role that is evidently a source and influence to Stand-up comedy in Nigeria is enshrined among the Yoruba. This is the role of the court jesters known *asa* in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo, the foremost descendants of Oduduwa, the eponymous progenitor of the Yoruba. An *asa*, wears costumes (*aaso*) and made '…jest, created fun and satirised specific people' (Bade Ajayi, 1989; Aguoru, 2016). According to Ajayi, in ancient times, court jesters were a major source of entertainment in the palaces of Yoruba kings. By virtue of their profession, these jesters had to be creative and dynamic to keep their positions; they needed to be constantly on the ball to put in regular performances for specific days of the week, as well as during festive periods in the year. The *asa*, therefore, foreshadowed the contemporary stand-up comedian, here translated as *Oniduro* (the one who stands) to fit Yoruba parlance. Trite to say, the hallowed use of humour is still celebrated by the Yoruba at specific periods of the year. The Oke Ibadan festival in Ibadan during which humour – comics, ribaldry, jesting and joking - is venerated all day, testifies to the deep cultural implicature of humour among the Yoruba (Aguoru, 2016).

## *Eegun Apidan*: *Alarinjo* and *Oniduro* in context

It is fitting at this point to consider specific narratives in support of the status of *Alarinjo* to stand-up comedy in Nigeria. Adedeji (1981, 1994) drawing from ethnographic journals from 1826, describes how the ruling king had invited his guests to witness a performance given by the mask dramaturge which enjoyed the king's patronage. Recall that the *Alarinjo* theatre evolved from the ritual *Egungun* (Mask) cult. Adedeji alludes to the story told about the origin of the *Alarinjo*, following the mischief of the council members, the *Oyo-mesi*. The people of Oyo at some point had been forced out of the capital, Katunga, by marauding populations. When peace was finally restored, the king sent emissaries to Katunga with the charge to ascertain the suitability of moving back to the capital. The Oyo-mesi, however were by then unwilling to return to Katunga, so they decided to put up a 'scare show'. A scare crew comprised of a hunchback, a leper, an albino and persons with other physical deformities, disguised as ghosts to scare off the King's emissaries. However, following a lead from his cymbalist, Ologbin, the king had members of the cast of the 'scare show' rounded up and subsequently converted them, under the leadership of Ologbin, to entertainers in the kings court. The king, *Alaafin* Ogbolu was instantly nick named 'Oba Moro' the ghost catcher. One imagines that *Alaafin* Ogbolu must have had a morbid sense of humour to have been able to enjoy the re-enactment of the theatre of the six-stock characters that were made up of disabled and deformed persons who must have been a sight on stage!

The satiric story of the Ghost Catcher became the major play in the repertoire of the mask dramaturgy years after the demise of *Alaafin Ogbolu* and his faithful cymbalist who was poisoned because the *Egungun* cult saw the 'deritualization' (Ogundeji, 2003:7&8) of the masque performance as defying the cult. It became mandatory to perform the play during the installation of a new *Alaafin* as well as during three significant Yoruba festivals: the orisa *oko* festival, orisa *mole* festival and at the *Oduduwa* festival. At the wake of the futile scare show, the art of mask dramaturgy came to be known as *Eegun Apidan or Oje*'s art by the 17th Century. Upon its 'deritualization', the *Eegun Apidan* became established as a court theatre. It earned for itself the respect accorded a lineage profession that metamorphosed into troupes and later evolved into a

guild system with each group acquiring expertise in specific instruments, dance, poetry or acrobatics. The *Eegun Apidan* became involved in annual competitions which became the foundation for the formation of the professional *Alarinjo* troupe and actor succinctly captured in Adedeji's words as 'the costumed actor and a strolling player' (Adedeji, 1981:224).

Anchoring on Adedeji (1981), Jeyifo (1984) and Clark (2008), Aguoru identifies Hubert Ogunde as the pioneer of popular Yoruba travelling theatre, and narrated, in high relief, the influence of the *Alarinjo* theatre on the Yoruba travelling theatre (2011, 2012). This marked a renaissance of Yoruba art, since the mask dramaturge cult had been robbed of followership and patronage due to Christian religious imperialism, which abhorred any trace of syncretism. Thus, Ogunde, the precursor of the second generation of the professional *Alarinjo* theatre, revived the form and adopted the tenets of the first generation *Alarinjo* in his performances, blending them with the operatic form. Writing on the contemporary and continued significance of Biodun Jejifo's grandly written book on the Yoruba travelling theatre, Olakunle George observed that, "The Yoruba travelling theatre grew out of, and in rebellion against, imitative 'service of songs' and Christian concerts that were prevalent in nineteenth-century Lagos and continued into the early decades of the twentieth century…"the result of that rebellion, he concludes, is the "…the unprecedented inventiveness and social impact of the travelling theatre troupes"(George,2018 :15 & 16).

Remi Adedokun (1981:19) classifies the genres of the *Alarinjo* tradition under the operatic (musical), tragic, comic or farce and the tragicomedy. Not only these but also the adoption of extra-plotal beginnings, interlude, and endings. These can be seen in the opening and closing glees, in the use of comedy and the role of the comic in the development of Ogunde's plots. According to Biodun Jeyifo (1984) these inclusions dovetailed to the art of the comic in Moses Olaiya, who was "… perhaps the biggest crowd puller of all time in the Travelling Theatre movement" (13). To Jeyifo, Olaiya mastered his art and he was regarded as a comedian:

> ...whose productions being typically very long and uproariously comic…usually has his audience fully satiated. These deviations are also generally true of the host of imitators of the Olaiya School such as the Ojo Ladipo (Baba Mero) troupe and the Ola Omonitan (Ajimajasan) troupe (Jeyifo, 1984:13).

It is instructive noting that regarding form, Moses Olaiya redefined the aesthetics of performance by developing a framework for what became the tenets and principles of Yoruba comedy, and that those who towed his path followed suit. Adedokun (1981), Obafemi (2001) and Aguoru (2012, 2016) agree that the art of the Baba Sala of the Olaiya School takes root in the traditional role of the satirist in the Yoruba society either in the kings' court, in festivals or as portrayed in the traditional theatres. According to Adedokun the themes of this farcical genre are drawn:

> … from everyday social misnomer, corruption and vices. Obscenity, ribaldry and sheer vulgarity provide the verve of this highly extemporaneous theatrical specie … these comedians hold individuals, social institutions and vices up to ridicule in a most hilarious manner in order to effect positive change (1981:82-3).

One cannot quite overstate the significance of Olaiya's comedy to the development of comedy in Nigeria and Africa. So significant was his contribution that WNTV, the first television station in Africa wrote of him as a talent they had 'discovered' and his art and performances part of the significant contribution they had made in drama on the African continent. Consequent upon which Ikime Obaro wrote:

> One of the areas we WNTV think we have made a substantial contribution is that of drama. Our viewers are most likely to recall Alawada, easily our most popular comedy featuring Baba Sala (Moses Olaiya) and his group. Since 1967 when Baba Sala was discovered, he has

> established himself as a leading comedian in the country… his act is one which possesses international appeal, his dress, his facial expression… Alawada is often penetrating commentary on contemporary Nigeria (Obaro, 1979;43).

The celebration of his plays, on radio and TV gave him as much popularity as his live performances on stage. His continued influence on contemporary comedy is affirmed by Wole Soyinka who dedicated his play *Alapata Apata* (2011) to 'Moses Olaiya, The Inimitable *Alawada*'. Of him he wrote:

> Easily one of the greatest comic geniuses that the Nigerian stage has ever produced is Moses Olaiya…Moses Olaiya's metier was broad, socially disruptive, falstaffian…Alaba in this play was the kind of character I dreamt for Alawada, from whom therefore, inspiration for this play came (Soyinka, 2011: x-xi).

The emergence of Gbenga Adeboye the multitalented ace broadcaster in the early 1990s marked the peak of the impact of the combined *Alawada/Alarinjo* as a dominant cultural influence depicted in Yoruba stand-up comedy in Nigeria. Adeboye transformed the comic on radio, the master of ceremony or anchor of formal programmes into a different art, employing diverse forms and scripts of the operatic, chants, poetry, humour, skits, and music-comedy. He adopted an eclectic style in his stand-up activities developing character sketches and made impact globally. He invented a variety of forms and styles of comedy that took his art to the international community and made him a name before his death at the age of 42. He had a humorously syncretic religious ideology that simultaneously permitted him to be a Pastor, Alhaji, and an Oluwo rolling Islam, Christianity and the priesthood of indigenous and traditional religions of the Yoruba in one. He also completed his archetypical identity and role play by adopting the archetypal role of the king when he crowned himself King of *Oduology* (Traditional fables).

In essence, neo-culturalism in contemporary Nigerian theatrical arts found expression in the art of Gbenga Adeboye. The walls that held people bound: religious, ethnic, linguistic, political, and cultural and the layers of social stratification collapsed as more neo-cultural voices began to rise and the walls suddenly got demolished. All of a sudden, it was fun to poke at the poor and the rich and at all religions without expecting uproar.

As it was in the *Alarinjo* schools, the stand-up guilds began to spring up, forms of comedy concerts became established and promoters of stand-ups and comedy concerts emerged. The Nigerian public, that had gone stage and cinema wary because of the dangers and insecurities of states of emergency, the numerous curfews that characterised the decades of military dictatorship and the incomprehensible democracies that followed, suddenly returned. Though the fear of insecurity persisted, amidst diverse and other unresolved challenges, a new theatre enjoying the absolute followership of a new generation, uncommon patronage and playing to full houses had emerged.

A myriad of outlets: stage, television, DVDs, the internet and travelling by air and through diverse social media, largely controlled by this new generation gave Nigerian stand-up comedy wings and it did fly. Contrarily, the older generation, made up the travelling theatres and its patron assumed that "…the stage…is as good as dead..." (Adedeji and Ekwuazi, 1998:167) but invariably began to patronise the new form by migrating to the new media. Subsequently and according to Pakade (2020) "The documentation and distribution of the live performances, such as the documentary *In Stitches* and online streaming services such as Netflix, have also diversified the catalogue of stand-up comedy both in its production and accessibility to wider audiences"(Pakade, 2020:2).Nevertheless, a neo-cultural Nigerian popular theatre that unites ethnicities and identities in staged performances, meeting the utmost needs of a people in search of what transcends the politicking, that is the bane of the nation, had truly emerged.

# Trends in Contemporary Nigerian Stand-up Comedy

Most world theatres engage concrete structures and forms through which influences and analogies, movements and trends, genres and forms, motif-types and themes are examinable. Here the "empiricist and positivist" approach that characterise analysis seeking evidences of influences and origins are combined with considerations of "analogies and convergences" which play out in neo-cultural forms, genres and the status of contemporary Nigerian stand-up comedy. The inclusion of genres, motif-types and themes from possible and plausible origin centre on criticism of the neo-cultural form which continue to evolve (Aguoru, 2011:5).

Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma (2013) claims that "serious" developments in contemporary stand-up comedy began with AliBaba (real name: Alleluia Atunyota Akporobomeriere), who commenced his career in comedy during his undergraduate days at Bendel State University in the 1988. AliBaba's pace setting and trail blazing style and method of publicity indeed raised the tempo of the trends in Nigerian stand-up comedy. Whereas the precursor of contemporary Nigerian stand-up, Gbenga Adeboye's medium of communication was primarily Yoruba, part of his successor, AliBaba's shine derived from the fact that he took to the English convention which crossed ethnic boundaries. AliBaba gained sterling popularity by featuring on national television programmes, as well as on variety and personality shows. He signed up with companies and earned a handsome income; thus, raising the stakes for Nigerian stand-up comedy. Other comedians on the heels of AliBaba like Gbenga Adeyinka 1st, Basket Mouth, Julius Agwu transacted comedy with the Educated Nigerian English (ENE) spoken by elites. Later on, still in a bid to reach wider audience, performers began to use Nigerian pidgin; notable among whom is Gandoki, who is famed as the custodian of pidgin comedy of the warri-waffi style. The waffi style pidgin has come to be the preferred variety among artists who now code mix and code switch it with English and a myriad of other local languages, in quintessential neo-cultural fashion.

Also following closely, in AliBaba's stead were comedians like De Don, Klint de Drunk, I Go Dye to mention a few. In the last one and a half decades, several other prominent comedians such as Bovi, Basketmouth, AY, Bash, Omo Baba, Seyi Law, Funky Mallam, Mc Ajele, LafUp, Peteru, Still Ringing, Kelly Blind, SLK, Shete, Obama, Dr Smile, Dr Frick, Vitamin D, Rapindaddy, Olympia, Shem, Ojemba, Seeco, Mc Dannie B, Gordons, Akpororo, Elenu, Acapella, Ajebo, Pencil, Kelly black have emerged. In more recent times Female performers like Lepacious Bose, Tatafo, Helen Paul and Princess have also made their mark. Thus, AliBaba opened the floodgates for other stand-up comedians of his age; and collectively, that generation enterprisingly cultivated, promoted and mentored the new generation of the 21st Century stand-ups in Nigeria.

Without doubt, by year 2000 the therapeutic value of comedy had come to the fore in Nigeria. In a country perennially under pressure, humour serves as an escape from the rat race of work, financial, social and national crises. To buttress this point, Gordons, alias Comedy Barlusconi, christened his performance "The Gordons' Comedy Klinic Ward, a space that does good to individuals' body, spirit and soul". Indeed, borrowing from the premise of Stand-up Comedy, Nigerians are fast learning the tricks of weaving a joke out of life's miseries, such as the high spate of kidnapping and even the sad case of the abduction of two hundred school girls by the notorious Boko Haram terrorist group at Chibok.

Online newspapers, billboards, television adverts and diverse social media are platforms through which Nigerian stand-up comics maintain their social relevance and publicise forthcoming programmes. In addition, streams of recorded performances on all

forms of social media render stand-ups readily available to their patrons at the click of a button.

The impact of Nigerian stand-up comedy within the international community is worthy of mention. This theatrical genre avails Nigerians in the Diaspora not only of multi-cultural home-grown humour it, in particular, keeps them abreast with contemporary national issues while they let down their hair. There is also the nascent development of Nigerian stand-ups like M.C Mark Comedian to the United Nations (CUN), this category of Nigerian stand-ups live and perform in the Diaspora.

# Forms, Features and Theatrical Elements in Nigerian Stand-up Comedy

*Ab initio*, it was popular opinion that stand-up comedy was not a matter for intellectual critique and that, irrespective of their shared qualities; stand-up comedy and theatre were unrelated disparate forms. Chelsea Peretti (2002) emphasised the need for a register of terminologies adept for criticism of stand-up comedy discourse which would be useful in operationalising concepts peculiar to the genre (22). In the same manner Kelvin Casper (2016) is quite point-blank. He insists that stand-up comedy ought to be included in the curriculum of college freshmen. In detail, Casper states that such:

> … performances deftly dramatise context, audience and the artistic proofs as well as provide a palatable, engaging and … enjoyable manner in which to introduce genre of specific writing (2016: 426).

Elements such as dialogue, songs, stage, and audience and action characterisation distinguish drama and theatre from other forms of literature or performance. Stand-up comedy engages these elements and diverse eclectic approaches in mediating the relationship between the audience and the stand-ups on one hand, and the stand-ups, stand-up comedy and the community on the other hand. Essentially, mime and imitation are dominant acts of stand-ups, with stage business filling up the space (stage) where the stand-up transacts his business while the microphone is the major instrument and prop in his hand. Engaging these basic interpretative elements, the theatricality, impact and import of stand-up comedy as a form of theatre are unmistakable. In Peretti's opinion, the elements and forms of performance are adopted in specific ways by individual comedians. She notes that while some employ small jokes to build up the plot of a larger story, like a playwright developing scenes; some perform one-man shows, others pursue collaboration with theatre groups, yet others perform solo dramatic comic pieces by playing multiple roles. This is corroborated by Cécile Vigourox's observation that comics rationalise their choice of stand-up comedy as opposed to a one person show with stage characters and props and a story line by invoking a sense of freedom to one's self that the genre provides (2015:250). The flexibility of the form stand-up comedy takes is in itself its greatest asset.

For instance, Klint de Drunk, plays multiple roles in his performances. The strikingly recurrent is that of the comedian, the drunk, and narrator. The excerpt below is typical of a full-length plot and storyline of his: he plays the role of a drunk, which in itself is a comical character who adopts the posture of a storyteller. He primes the audience by first cracking a political joke about Charles Taylor who was seeking political asylum in Nigeria at that time before proceeding to ridicule the "talented" reggae musicians for their gimmicks and antics.

**Klint de Drunk on Talent**

The talent we have in Nigeria is so much that we are even bringing in other talented people. I know one tailor, he is somewhere in Akwa Ibom, his name is Charles Taylor very talented.

**Audience Response**: Laughter

The most talented people in this country are the reggae musicians. After smoking *Igbo* (*marijuana cigarette*), their eyes will be red and their brains will block and they will want to sing for you but they will keep forgetting and coincidentally remembering. So before they sing they will think of the experience they experienced (experience *they have had*). Then they will remember one day, they are walking to see their friend and then they hit their leg on the stone …music is set. When they want sing for you they will first dance for you, when they are dancing they are actually allowing blood to flow (gesticulation shows he is referring to blood flowing into their heads)

So that they will sing start singing:

**Klint as reggae musician:** Just the other day,
I say, just the other day

**Klint as Narrator:** Then they will make some noise,

**Klint as reggae musician:** Just the other day, I came out from my own house ieo, eo, eo eoo

**Klint as Narrator:** They are trying to remember the lyrics

**Klint as reggae musician:** Then I saw my friend,
He was standing around the road,
So I decided, I decide,
So I decided ieo, eo, eo eoo

**Klint as Narrator:** A beg weytin dem dey (*please, what is the musician trying to decide)* decide or what are they yet to decide?

**Klint as reggae musician:** Oh why, why, why, why, why, why ,why o
I started walking, walking, walking, walking, walking
So I stepped on stone, as was walking (5)
I cut my leg on a stone
Stone, stone, stone, stone, stone, stone, stone

**Klint as Narrator:** At this time they will confuse you with something you don't understand like;

**Klint as reggae musician:** Anida e, anida e, anida e, anida e
And other things like

**Klint as reggae musician:** O why? Why? Why? Why o?

**Klint as Narrator:** So please, let me ask you for the title.
What is the title of the song? Is it?
O why? O why o? (William O. 3)

Here, Klint de Drunk multitasks, he is the drunk narrator, who caricatures a highly intoxicated reggae musician. He is also a logical critic who intersperses his musical performance with dialogue and questions directed at the audience. He points out the apparent mishmash that most reggaes players give to the ever-thrilled audience. His performance is a recitative and also operatic in form. His lines are staccatos but he succeeds in narrating the tale of drunkard who wants to make jest of musicians who are on hard drugs.

# Solo Dramatic Comic Piece

Mohammed Danjuma's performance is a typical dare devil religious joke and it is a solo dramatic comic piece.

> **Danjuma the Narrator**: A few years ago we had Sharia not …Christians killing Moslems. A man was stopped by some people and asked what his religion was; he responded
>
> **Danjuma the Mimic**:"I am a Christian".
> Let me ask you a question every good Christian must know.
>
> **Danjuma the Mimic**: In the name of the Father, Son and …?
>
> **Danjuma the Mimic**: Him Mama (his mother)
>
> **Danjuma the Mimic**: Are you sure you are a Christian?
>
> **Danjuma the Mimic**: *Walai ta lai a su mobi lai*! (*Swearing like a typical Moslem*) I am a Christian.
> (William O. 3)

Here Danjuma engages dramatic irony. He juxtaposes images of the Sharia law and contexts within Moslems and Christians who live in Northern Nigeria. He presupposes that an individual that tells lies about his religion will be found out. Such a person will not understand the fundamentals and basic observances of the religion and is bound to subconsciously recourse to the tenets of his or her religion. 'Him mama' seems logical following father and son, swearing in in a manner that is typically Moslem finally gives the fellow away.

There are as many styles of performance as there are themes, character types. Some are flashy and spectacular while others are provocative, are cathartic narratives or simply do what Peretti (2002:21) refers to as 'shit talking'. Gandoki's purge medicine, church festival and 'shit full church' (William O. 3) jokes fall within this category. Though stand-up comedy in Nigeria has enjoyed extensive linguistic and pragmatic explorations, the theatricality of the form defies the initial inertia that affected the creation of critical tools to engage stand-up comedy. Nevertheless, stand-up comedy in Nigeria requires more critical attention, specifically its style and the form.

# Nigerian stand-up comedians' bewildering array of themes

The neo-cultural harmony of seemingly discordant voices is another instructive angle to Nigerian stand-up comedy. Dramatic performances, in their various forms possess didactic values which endears these performances to the audience who are usually impressed by the visualisation of ideas or societal ideals. The range of themes that characterise Nigerian stand-up comic folio is profoundly impressive. This is particularly because they are imbued with directorial characteristics and they humorously seek to influence the thoughts and habits of the members of society through humour and satire. These ideas often seem to be strung together in constructing a plot or overall theme of a comedy concert. Satire of diminishing social values is a dominant theme in Nigerian stand-up comedy. Recent theme-based studies on stand-up comedy portray identity issues along with cultural differences as central themes. Margherita Dore (2018) not only corroborates this but her study on stand-up comedy further reflects the conscious efforts put in by stand-up comedians to engage the audience in a manner that guarantees a positive response while broaching these matters. The humour is deliberately constructed

to negotiate positive responses to sensitive topics by stand-up comedians (Dore, 2018:105).

For instance, Dario Fo, Comedian and Nobel prize winner is cited to have said: "comics always deal with the same problem - hunger, be it hunger for food, sex or even for dignity, for identity, for power" (Peretti, 2000:20). Hunger in this context is apt in describing the multiplex cravings of the audience, which the comics go to great lengths to meet.

For instance, the influence of women, especially young girls on men and older men are deplored in reckless abandon as thematic preoccupation for stand-ups in Nigeria while, stand-ups strategically assuage the hunger for sex and sexual innuendoes in aspects of the comedy concerts especially the structure of the performance which includes, rigorous or erotic dance, music and choreography of popular and contemporary Nigerian musicians.

Jessyka Finely (2016) through a feminist lens brings in perspectives on the trends and identity markers in performances held in the 1990s:

> Part of what come to constitute black racial identity in the pop cultural imagination in the early 1990s was the barrage of mass media images in music, videos, television shows, song lyrics, and film of black youth engaging in illicit sexuality and displaying excessive materialism, titillating yet dangerous, anti-establishment practice associated with street culture (781).

Performances that connote such identity markers as well as portray sex and sexuality are deliberately created to titillate the audience. Bovi is excellent at portraying such scenarios through onomatopoeic sounds and mime. One can decipher the undertones even with Basketmouth's shrewdness in the following excerpt:

> Imagine the difference between Ajebo (*a refined well-born and bred*), bachelor and Pako (*unrefined and unsophisticated*) bachelor. Ajebo go dey (*lives in a*) duplex, sitting room downstairs and bedroom for upstairs. Abeg (*I beg*[2]*)* how he go tell babe (girlfriend) wey come visit am to follow am go him room for upstairs?( how easy will it be for him to convince his visiting girlfriend to go in to his bedroom) Whereas the Pako guy no get stress because him dey live just one room with no chair ( has no such challenge ). In fact the only thing for the room na bed and small black and white TV. The bed sef no get any stick, he go just throw am for floor dia (his apartment is sparsely furnished and his beddings are on the floor of his one room apartment) So sometimes, pako dey enjoy and no dey get stress with babes (he therefore implies that the unsophisticated bachelor usually has his way more with ladies) (William O. 3).

In addition, the comics seek to create characters that the audience can at once connect with and ridicule; they paint scenario which members of the audience can identify with, reduce them to ridicule and, by so doing, trigger humour and laughter. Comedians, with a keen understanding of society, create convivial plots which avail ordinary citizens the golden moments to poke fun at the rich and powerful, who, within the ambience of comedy take such satire as part of the humour. Hence stand-up comedies are apt social class levellers.

Social avarice like stealing and attitudes to stealing is portrayed in innumerable ways, De Don in one of his performances directly speaks on this syndrome as a national avarice though he uses stealing clothes off the line as example:

> I don observe for Nigeria say if naija person lost something it dey pain am well well but if na we obtain somebody it no dey pain us. Na why be say for estate people dey move clothes anyhow for line. You fit imagine say person go open boutique with all the clothes wey he move from line.
> *( I have observed that in Nigeria when one incurs a loss it is an extremely painful experience, but when one takes what belongs to another person or defrauds another individual it is accepted with pleasantness. For*

[2] Abeg (I beg) here indicates the consternation of the comedian. He wants the audience to reason with him.

*instance, clothes that are spread on drying lines in residential estates are stolen with such impunity that one would think they are stolen for the purpose of opening a boutique) (William O. 3).*

The ability to create stereotypes: round, flat, archetypical, gendered, class- based, national and ethnic is the highpoint of the characterisation of Nigerian stand-ups. The ability to see humorous peculiarities in the distinct ethnic groups that make up the nation is also instructive, for instance Basketmouth while drawing attention to stealing as a social avarice plays it within an ethnic context:

> Na only for Warri thief go steal your thing dem go still come block you say dem thief your thing. One guy for Refinery Junction, dem move (stole) him phone, two months later the guy come stand for the junction dey wait for motor, na him one guy approach am say guy you stand here two months ago wey dem steal your phone, one Nokia 3310, blue abi? The guy say yes hoping say he go see the phone, na him the guy go bring the phone say o boy put the pin number we no fit sell this thing since na, put the pin make I fit sell am. Dem go move your thing come block you say na dem move am.
> (*It is only in Warri that a thief will steal what belongs to you and still come back to declare that he stole it! There was a guy at Refinery Junction whose mobile phone was stolen, two months after the guy was at the same junction awaiting a cab when a fellow approached him and said "you stood here two months ago and your phone was stolen? A Nokia 3310, blue colour?" The victim says "Yes" in expectation that his phone had been recovered. The fellow returns with the phone and says "Old boy, put the pin number, we have not been able to sell the thing". They will rob you of your possession and still have the effrontery to tell you that they did!)*
> (William O. 3).

Here, one is made to see the effrontery of these people and not necessarily the vices of their villains. The ridicule is not only humorous but instructive.

Adultery and sexual perversion as rampant social avarices are also portrayed by contrasts and how the general posture and popular notions about these are humorously reflected:

> Imagine small 18 years old babe go dey call him Aristo[3] Baby. Man wey old enough to be him papa. I love Lagos girls, na for only Lagos you go see young girls they call married men with confidence. Those girls go just take hand knack these big men wey some of them be chief like; honey, open the door for me, honey help me with that cup. If their wife call them like that or try that same thing with the, she go reach village that same day.
> (*Fancy a petite 18-year-old girl calling her elderly lover (Aristo) Baby. A man old enough to be her father! I love Lagos girls, it is only in Lagos you will see young girls calling married men with confidence. These young girls casually knock the heads of these big men, though a number of them are chiefs. They have the audacity to instruct their men; 'honey, open the door for me, honey help me with that cup.' If their wives dare to refer to them like that or sends them on such mundane errands she will be sent packing and will in fact arrive at her village that same day)* (Okpocha B.2).

Basketmouth attempts a lesson on health education when he ridicules persons with mouth odour,

> Mouth odour no be bad thing, no be sickness. Just know how to use it, if you get mouth odour you fit quarrel win the quarrel, argue win the argument, and settle fight without touching the people. In fact you no need insecticide for house.
> (*Mouth odour is not a bad thing, it is not an illness. Just know how to take advantage of it. If you have mouth odour you are sure to win an argument, you are sure to settle fight without touching people as a matter of fact you have no need of insecticides in the house*) (Okpocha B.2).

He sharply contrasts this with onomastics of names and humorously implies that the name given to a girl or the name a girl bears determine how she is treated by her suitors or what she is offered by them in his words:

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[3] Elderly men who date very young girls, they are also referred to as 'sugar daddies'

> Basically, e get places wey u fit carry girl go, girls wey their name sound tush like Tasha, Latifa take them to Eko Hotel, Le Meridian but if her name na Linda, Jennifer, Amanda take them to places like Mr Biggs, Tasty Fried Chicken but, if her name na Chioma, Nneka, Kemi, Bisola no waste your money carry them go mama put, like Ghana rice. But if her name na Atutuboyoyo no carry them comot, give them money make them go cook for house.
> *(Basically, there are categories of places that you can take girls to. For instance, girls that bear names that sound sophisticated like Tasha, Latifa you take to Eko Hotel, Le Meridian but those with names like Linda, Jennifer, Amanda take them to places like Mr Biggs, Tasty Fried Chicken, if her name is Chioma, Nneka, Kemi, Bisola don't waste your money, take her to a local eatery where they sell food like Ghana rice. But if her name is Atutuboyoyo don't bother to take her out, give her money to prepare the food in the house)* (Okpocha B.2).

He shrewdly connects these with the politics of good looks and how it should influence mate selection when he says:

> I'm with an organisation and we are trying to help children. It's an NGO we're helping children and I want you people to support us. The children are suffering, if you know that you're not good looking get married to someone that is good looking. The amount of ugly children in Nigeria is getting too much. If you no fine, help your pikin, marry fine person! (*If you are not good looking help your offspring, marry a fine person!*)
> (Okpocha B.2).

He humorously juxtaposes several unconnected yet logical images and imagery in constructing the plot of his narrative thereby achieving humour and laughter.

The comedians often thematically weave political problems, paint portraits of politician's greed and mismanagement of funds in public office in to their performances.

A thought-provoking question is asked about the basic qualification and experience of politicians who run the nation:

> But why be say we no dey ask our politicians of their experience if dem won contest and if we won look for job them go dey ask us of our own work experiences? (*How be it that we do not ask politicians of their work experience when they want to contest a position and when we are job seeking they make work experience a major issue)* (Okpocha B.2).

Ethnicity recurrently features as a source of contrast and comparison as comedians mimic and inflect their voices to tease out the differences in the speech patterns and the linguistic identities of the ethnicities that make up the Nigerian. De Don in the following excerpt stylishly takes a jab at Igbo boys from the hinterland;

> No even make mistake of giving person from village your phone, the mistake wey I do, be say I give one guy from Enugu my phone say if anybody call make he tell the person to call back in the next 30minutes, the guy no know say phone get sweet melody, na so the guy dance to twelve missed calls.
> (Don't ever *make the mistake of giving someone that is from your village your phone. I once committed the blunder, I gave one guy from Enugu my phone with the instruction that anyone who calls should call back in 30 minutes. The guy didn't know that the ring tone of the phone is the sweet melody it makes, that is how he danced to* twelve *missed calls)* (William O. 3).

In some extreme cases the choice of delicacies of specific ethnic groups are satirised. Ali Baba in one of his performances picked on dogs as pets and dogs as delicacies:

> Did you know that the people that went for Tu Face's wedding; there was a dog show as part of the show? You know, people went for boat ride, safari. (*Laugh.*) And they bounced three people. They didn't allow them enter. I don't know why. Kate Henshaw, Ini Edo and Forester Giwa. They said we come to watch... (*Laugh.*) They asked them, "What part of Nigeria?" They said South East. They asked, "What part?" They said "Calabar". They said you can't come in here; it's a dog show not abattoir (Utube 13th Nov 2016).

Poverty is a dominant theme which plays out in intriguing ways among stand-ups in Nigeria. Almost every stand-up identifies with the poor and with those who used to be poor but claim to have become wealthy celebrities. Poverty is an archetypal symbol that is played recurrently and the emergent stereotypes from this theme earlier referred to is the '*Ajebo*'( aje butter) and the '*Pako*'( aje paki/pako) contextually *ajebo* refers to the offspring of the sophisticated elite who is reared on butter and '*paki*' refers to the offspring of the poor or wretched, reared on cassava/ wood, one who has become dynamic by being street wise and who struggles to fit into the upper class within the social strata The paradigm of the rich and the poor is engaged in a pragmatic manner that captures the hearts and subsequently the patronage of the audience. Basketmouth in this excerpt portrays poverty as a symbol:

> When we dey grow up things tough so te, things rough. My school dey Apapa and I dey trek every day from Okoko to Apapa. I trek so te my shoes no road by themselves. During weekend if dem send me to market, the shoe by itself go dey direct me go Apapa where my school dey.
> *(When we were growing up things were so tough, things were rough. My school was in Apapa and I had to trek daily from Okoko to Apapa. I trekked so much that my shoes could find their way to school. On weekends when I am sent to the market, the shoes will by itself direct me to Apapa where my school is.* )
> (Okpocha B.2).

The *Ajebo* and the *Pako* have become recurrent character types and stereotypes in the repertoire of the Nigerian stand-up comedy. Comedians and their audience no doubt privilege the *Pako* because of the humour generated by the crudeness but practical manner in which the *Pako* resolves issues and in recent times more jokes have been shared on how the *Pakos* always emerge rulers and political leaders because of their ruggedness.

Social stratification and the indices that distinguish the poor from the rich is also a laughable constant thematic preoccupation in Nigerian stand-up comedy. Basketmouth portrays the challenges of heavy traffic in metropolitan cities in Nigeria and the street hawkers that take advantage of these queues to sell all sorts of items. He advances his plot by insisting that the hawkers respond to types of vehicles as indices of wealth or placement in the social strata and the owners of such vehicles are accorded commensurate honour:

> Because of the holdup wey dey Lagos, hawkers dey sell everything. Dem they sell plates, spoon, knives, vegetable, and stove. You fit just park cook soup inside hold up. (The *recurrent traffic jam in Lagos makes it possible for hawkers to sell everything. They sell plates, spoon, knives, vegetable, and stove. You might as well just park your vehicle and prepare soup in the traffic jam.*) The most annoying thing is that the kind of car you drive determines the kind of product they sell to you. If you dey drive cars like Mazda 2.2, 404 dem go just come your car, 'Sir, sir, sir recharge card, Five Alive' but if you dey drive cars like V.Boot or all those bad, bad 504 dem go just come your side say 'Bros, buy your rat poison' (If *you drive cars like Mazda2.2, 404, they will come by your car and advertise "Sir, sir, sir, recharge card, Five Alive". But if you are driving cars like V.Boot or a rickety 504 Peugeot they will just come near your vehicle and say 'Bros, buy your rat poison'* ( Okpocha B.2).

Nigerian stand-ups constantly compare happenings or fictional experiences they claim to have had in other countries with their experiences in Nigeria. These jokes or humour laden stories comparatively examine attitudes, and the sense of order that seems to be lacking in Nigeria with the orderliness of other much more developed countries.

For instance, the search light is turned on the Nigerian Police Force in this manner:

> Two weeks ago when a friend of mine went to London, he tell me say the Police, the way them dey take (they will ask) ask for your papers they will stand beside your car and say 'Sir pull over', they will talk to you kindly. They will say 'Good afternoon sir, can I have your

> papers?' But for Nigeria dem go first block half of the road with drums dem go come shout 'Park! Park! Park here now!' and they are always drunk. For night dem go say 'Inner light' even for hot afternoon, 'Inner light'. The day wey I know say dem drink too much na one night when I dey drive comot for Victoria Island, naso dem stop me say 'Park here! Inner light!' Another guy come dey tell one okada (motorbike) man say 'Park here! Inner light!'.
> *(But in Nigeria they would have initially blocked half of the road with drums and they will begin to shout 'Park! park! Park here now!' and they are always drunk. In the night they will say put on your 'Inner light, even in the blaring afternoon sun 'Inner light!' The day I realised that they had too much to drink was one night when I was driving out of Victoria Island. That is how they stopped me and yelled 'Park here! Inner light!' Another guy began to tell one bike man, 'Park here! Inner light!') ( Okpocha B.2).*

De Don paints another scenario of a fellow, whose vehicle has just been stolen,

> I dey London last week when my friend lost his car as he come out from the supermarket, the guy no make one noise, he just comot him phone call police in another 20 minutes them get the car back but in Nigeria here, if you lost your motor you go first craze for like one hour before person go remind you make you make police report you go dey hear things like 'But I park my car here. No, no, no, here…I pass through Wuse… traffic jam at Area 1'. People go think say the car owner dey mad, dem go carry am go psychiatric, before you know dem no go see him car again.
> *I was in London last week when my friend lost his car as he came out from the supermarket, the guy didn't make a noise, he just pulled out his phone, called the police and in another 20 minutes the vehicle had been recovered and restored. But in Nigeria here, lose your vehicle you will first run mad for about an hour before someone reminds you to make a police report. You will begin to hear the owner say things like '…but I parked my car here. No, no, no, here…I passed through Wuse… traffic jam at Area 1.' People will begin to think that the car owner is mad, they will take him to psychiatric, hospital and before you realise it the vehicle is gone for good.*
> (William O. 3).

In a domestic context Gbenga Adeyinka the 1st portrays two mother/daughter interaction and the likely cultural responses to issues on mate selection from each region:

> An American mother, if her daughter tells her, "You won't believe, my boyfriend Brown. I tried him with my friend Jane and they're getting married next week." The mother will say "Oh my God! He did that to you? Oh my God! He broke your heart. You need to see a therapist. You need to lie down." Try that with a Yoruba mother; "You know my boyfriend Kola? You know my best friend Rita? I tried Kola with Rita o. They're getting married in three months' time." "Kare, omo 're bi'yan (Very good, a child as 'good' as pounded yam). Tester, tester. That your Rita friend like this; you tried your boyfriend with her; they're getting married. Emi ko ni mo bi e (I definitely did not give birth to you). Omo ale ni e; mo ti so tele (I've always said it, you are bastard). Sa lo gbomi ka'na mofe lo'we (Go and put my bath water to boil)." Till you get married and leave this house, what is your name? Tester! (U Tube)

Here, Adeyinka portrays distinctly contrasting socio cultural and psychological responses from the mothers. Other topical issues include the regular distractions that members of the audience live with and which may not allow the audience to respond appropriately to the show such as losing a girlfriend or being robbed prior to the show.

The ability to create national and ethnic stereotypes is the highpoint of the characterisation of Nigerian stand-ups. Imitation, mimicry and expressive body language are ingeniously engaged to portray character types. Politicians and the Nigerian political scene, for instance, feature abundantly as objects of jokes. In recent years the body language of former President Goodluck Jonathan as well as the choice of words of his wife, then First Lady, Dame Patience, the looks of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, as well as Governor Oshiomole of Edo State have been hatched and re-hatched countless times in jokes and comic skits.

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The Nigerian film industry and its stars constitute another class of character types replete in stand-up comedies. The comics often underscore ludicrous absurdities and illogic in the production of Nigerian home videos, known as Nollywood. According to Okpocha (Basket Mouth),

> Nigerian home videos no try (*are still behind times*). Watch American movies listen to the sound track, the sound track does not have anything to do with the title of the movie, ( in Nigeria) the sound track and the name of the movies na (are) the same thing. Slow motion for American movies na (*is*) for some kind bad place (a sort of terrifying scene) wey (*that*)the actor wan (wants to) shoot, fall, roll but Nigerian film even when … they write the name of the producers na (*it is*) with slow motion even when Ramsey Noah dey talk na (*is talking, it is*) with slow motion, the most annoying part na (*is*) their posters, from the poster you don (*have*) understand the movie
>
> *Nigerian videos are still behind in many things. If you watch an American movie and listen to the sound track, it usually has nothing to do with the title of the movie. In Nigeria, the soundtrack and the name of the movies are the same! Slow motion in American movies are reserved for terrifying scenes, perhaps when an actor wants to shoot, fall or roll, but in Nigerian films: when they write the name of producers, it is with slow motion, when Ramsey Noah speaks, it is in slow motion. The most annoying part is the posters made for the films. Once you see the poster you have understood the film* (Okpocha B.2).

Such friendly jibes thrown at Nollywood stars have helped improve the quality of video productions in Nigeria in no small measure, especially in the areas of adverts and voice over for the trailers that precede the film debuts, and the narrative and musical animation in action films. There are also jokes on spousal communication and ridicule that take place in public spaces particularly articulated with the use of dramatic irony. Gandoki in a unique manner interrogates a man's lack of sense of responsibility towards his immediate family implying that it is synonymous to being dead. He says:

> I dey church na him our pastor say make all widows come out for prayers, see as widows dey come out, na him one lady come out too, na him her husband hold her, 'Are you a widow?' Na with tears the woman take reply am say 'Out of the eight children wey we born u no train anyone of them' (*I was in church and our pastor called widows out for a special ministration. As they began filling out a woman joined them. Her husband pulled her and asked 'Are you a widow?' The woman tearfully replied 'You have trained none of the eight children we have…'*) (William O. 3).

In the final analysis, the themes range from anything to everything from domestic to health issues even, family planning, and the use of condoms in prevention of STDs.

Irrespective of the thematic preoccupation, the success of the stand-up comedian is determined by the versatility of his art. Stand-ups remarkably incorporate the solo-artist and the many voices and body language of absent characters, whose momentary portraits are nonetheless unmistakably vivid. According to Oliver Double (2016), '… the comedian appears on stage apparently as himself. But within gags and routines, comics often briefly take on the voice and posture of the characters they describe' (Double 2016). The rigour and intense rehearsals put into the development and scripting of the jokes and other elements of the performance, as well as proper audience profiling help to ensure the success of the comedian's art. Ted Ray, a renowned European comic, wrote:

> Every night, hour after hour, I would stand in front of the mirror in my bedroom, grimacing, smiling, and winking, with the idea of getting the most effective expression for putting over a joke…Every inflection of voice and every shade of emotion as reflected in a comedian's voice do count tremendously and I was determined that if hard work and ceaseless rehearsal would help, no trouble on my part would be too much (Double, 2016:317).

The success of stand-up in Nigeria no doubt takes root in the proficiency of these comics in communication, particularly verbal and nonverbal arts and body language. The ability to convincingly, assume multiple personalities, including that of the opposite gender, or adherents of other religions adds spice to the art of the comedian.

# Music comedy and Christian comedy as other forms of Nigerian stand-up comedy

Nigerian stand-up comedy privileges the variety form as its programme. This consists of mime, dance choreography, musical interludes, solo instrumentals. There are operatic comedies where topical issues are re-enacted, others include humour-endowed by the crass with legendary Gbenga Adeboye and contemporary Julius Agwu; stand-ups with lengthy hours of comedy theatre.

Julius Agwu's Different *work dey o*, is an extremely humorous type of this form, in a full-length song he juxtaposes the image of 'work', with the new meaning work assumes in contemporary Nigeria. He uses Pidgin English to spice the song while national characters, professions and settings feature prominently in this music comedy. He portrays as well as satirises the Soldier, Gateman, the Honourable members in the House of Assembly and men who ride the motorbike among others. He conclusively ridicules a trend that became popular when mobile phones became a dominant form of communication in Nigeria. He subtly implies that the annoying manner people adopt of 'flashing' numbers instead of making actual calls have also become a profession of sorts.

Stand-up comedy in Nigeria has also created room for itself in religious spaces and among Christians and Muslims with the emergence of comics like Holy Mallam in the Church and Funky Mallam in the Mosques. The quintessential prophet and his interpreter is also excellently played by AY and Still Ringing. Tribal stereotypes found in the art and characterisation Funky Mallam and LafUp are also examples of forms that celebrate specific ethnic identities'.

# Conclusion

The emergence of the neo-cultural form of stand-up in Nigeria comedy has been the focus of this paper. It examines the unanimous adoption of a multicultural posture within the usually polemic Nigerian multi-ethnic space. It interrogates the influence of traditional comedy, on the contemporary form of stand-up comedy in Nigeria. Evidently, stand-up comedy in Nigeria has benefitted tremendously from professional travelling theatres particularly the *Awada Alarinjo* Yoruba tradition. Navigating through times and themes by eclectic neo-cultural modifications, the current form has achieved an intercultural balance to the extent that a new culture has emerged. Critically chronicling professional contexts of humour in Nigeria, the trends reveal features of traditional forms of comedy that are sustained as well as contemporary and syncretic forms that have emerged. Dramatic and theatrical elements such as actors/caricaturists, props, stage, music, mime are implements that are thematically engaged in satirising and for creating humour in Nigeria. While stand-up theatres seem to have 'plateaued' in some parts of the world (King, 2014:59), contemporary Nigerian stand-up theatres thrive and narrate the Nigerian story with humour-coated lips to audiences *in situ* and in the Diaspora. Indeed the audience is part of the dramatis personae in live shows and in absentia on social media and other media as they burst out in boisterous laughter at the folly of their very lives as humorously depicted by the multi-faceted stand-up comedian.

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# Discography

| | |
|---|---|
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| Adeyinka Gbenga the 1st | UTube |
| AlliBaba | UTube |
| Agwu Julius | Musicomedy |
| Okpocha Bright | BasketMouth Uncensored (VCD) Volume 2 |
| Williams Opa | Nite of a Thousand Laughs (VCD) Volume 3 |

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# Comedy on the Cusp of Plurality: Gbenga Adeboye and the Context of Social Critique in Nigeria

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"Ní'jọ́ a bá kú là ń d'ère, èrìyàn ò sunwọ̀n láà'yè"
[No one is worth anything while alive; we are only deified after death]
— **Yorùbá proverb**

[A] critical theory of society not only diagnoses the pathologies of modernity, reflecting upon the experiences of injustice motivating various social movements, but also attempts to offer a positive alternative to prevailing forms of social domination and political injustice.
— **Robert Sinnerbrink** et al (2006)

This essay situates the under-theorised comic-critical oeuvre of the late Nigerian comedian and social critic, Gbenga Adeboye, within the context of social critique in Nigeria. As the legitimate precursor of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, Gbenga Adeboye combined satire and comedy into a powerful social criticism of the social foundation of the Nigerian state. Through his songs, comedies, satires and social homilies, Gbenga Adeboye was a formidable subaltern voice who not only spoke for the masses, but was firmly situated within the cracks of subaltern existence. In this essay, I made a distinction between the comic art of Adeboye and his critical oeuvre. But, there is also a case to be made for what I call the comic-critical efforts of Adeboye that enabled him to speak truth to power and its misuse in Nigeria. This makes him different from most of his successors whose comedies were caught up in the allure of commercialism. However, I argue that Gbenga Adeboye's subaltern position constitutes a critical limitation of his significance as a critic of the Nigerian predicament. This is because while he committed his entire comic-critical art to understanding Nigeria's plural challenge, he was also caught up in the ethnic chauvinism that was at the very heart of that unruly plurality.

**Keywords**: Social criticism; Gbenga Adeboye; Fela; Comedy; comic-critical; Subalternity; Nigeria; Satire; Postcolonial

# Introduction

It will not be apt to say that Gbenga Adeboye (1959-2003), the late Nigerian ace comedian, satirist, musician and social critic, has been under-theorised. He has not been theorised at all in the same manner that the full weight of theory has been brought to bear on the social-critical oeuvre of, say, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. Since his death on April 30, 2003, the memory of the late comedian has been preserved only by fellow entertainers rather than intellectuals. Social criticism in Nigeria is usually associated with notable names like Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the late eccentric Afrobeat maestro; Gani Fawehinmi, the late legal luminary and social crusader; Wole Soyinka, and so on. Yet, there are so many critical others who have remained incognito in intellectual circle but have also uniquely contributed to unearthing the cracks in Nigeria's social foundation. We have in mind folk musicians like Ayinla Omowura, Yusuf Olatunji, as well as some of the stand-up comedians who are now flourishing after the demise of Adeboye. This essay will argue, on the contrary, that Gbenga Adeboye not only occupies the same social-critical context that threw up those Nigerian intellectuals have decided to study; his comic-critical oeuvre provides a critical compass by which we can understand that postcolonial context.

As a satirist, musician and comedian, Gbenga Adeboye constitutes a unique case study because he combined in himself two formidable components of social criticism—music and comedy—mixed with an incredible linguistic dexterity with words, knowledge of the Yorùbá culture and a mimic mastery of almost all Nigerian languages. This alone gives him a wide base with the subaltern population in Nigeria than any other social critic who either appeals to the intelligentsia or achieves a larger-than-life, but distanced, status. Wole Soyinka and Gani Fawehinmi would be critics like that. Both seem to champion the cause of the subaltern but in ways, and with a language, that go right over the heads of the masses. In other words, Fawehinmi and Soyinka *speak for* them. Gbenga Adeboye communicated in the subaltern voice because he was arguably one himself in spite of his fame.

And this, we will argue, constitutes his basic critical limitation. Gbenga Adeboye makes more impact in social criticism with the obviously comic dimension of his oeuvre than those in which he actually went out of his way to intervene in Nigeria's predicament. In the latter, he betrays a crude, almost infantile, and even prejudiced understanding that eventually undermined the breath of his native intelligence and insight—guarded by a beautiful semantic acrobatic—into the Nigerian situation.

# The idea and context of social critique

The objective of any social criticism is usually the attempt to interrogate and correct a practice, belief or idea that seems to have some form of harmful effects on the administration of the human society. Thus, for instance, we can critique a piece of music or literature or fashion or social practice that contains negative messages inimical to the wellbeing of the society. In other words, social critique aims at the uncovering or diagnosis of social pathologies and consequently marshal "a reflexively redeemable norm (or series of norms) against which the validity of a given social practice can be assessed" (Sinnerbrink et al, 2006: 4).

Consider Plato and the organisation of the ancient Athenian society. As at the time he wrote the *Republic*, Plato had already abandoned the hope of a political life for philosophy. This disillusionment with politics was borne out of the death of Socrates, his teacher, at the hand of the Athenian government. The *Republic*, in this sense, can be taken to be a form of critique levelled against the Athenian state and its declining ethos. Socrates was accused of polluting the minds of the youth who were being challenged, through the famous Socratic interlocution, to rethink their ideas and ideals. The end of

the existential drama was that Socrates was forced to drink the poisonous hemlock. Plato was devastated.

At his trial, Socrates made the famous "gadfly argument":

> And now, Athenians, I am not going for my own sake, as you may think, but for yours, that you may not sin against God by condemning me, who am his gift to you….I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state and all day long and in all place am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. You will not find another like me, and therefore I would advise you to spare me.

When Socrates ended his rhetorically outstanding speech to the Athenian jurors, he had established his reputation as a social critic. Josiah Ober sums up Socrates' credential:

> But by [the end of his speech, and in spite of his knowledge of the rhetorical conventions of Athens and the audience expectations,] he has not aligned himself with the democratic norms embraced by his fellow citizens. Instead, he has proved that his own political convictions are drastically at odds with popular views, and that his irritating, idiosyncratic everyday practice of examining his fellow Athenians (and finding them painfully wanting in wisdom), followed necessarily from his convictions. He has demonstrated that he is, by his own lights, a patriotic citizen who cares deeply about the good of his *polis* and one who consistently acts in what he sees as his city's best interests; but he has also shown that, in light of his own definition of patriotism, Socrates must be regarded as a uniquely patriotic Athenian. Moreover, given the problematic current condition of the *polis,* for Socrates "doing good" means acting as a social critic: questioning fundamental Athenian beliefs in conversations held in public and private spaces of the city (2003: 5).

Socrates' case, as Ober argues, could be taken as establishing an "ethics of social criticism" because Socrates considered his task, though contrary to the popular expectation, as a dimension of *doing good* for his fellow Athenians and for the state. Social criticism is therefore sustained by the ideal of social hope or of social salvation in spite of the dangers of suppurating pathologies (Kern, Laux and Pruisken, 2017). Social critique confronts the present and its predicament in order to envision an "emancipated future" (Sinnerbrink et al, 2006: 7).

This connection between social criticism and the notions of the good and of hope immediately places the idea of critique right in the midst of the age-long task of practical philosophy saddled with the responsibility of fashioning a socio-political arrangement around which the good life can be provided for the people. Social critique is therefore always in search of means, mores and methods to push forward the frontiers of meaningful existence in the society. For Jeffrey di Leo, it is essentially "an optimistic, life-affirming approach" (2019: 8). It signals the possibility of politics in its true classical sense as the art of good government (Viroli, 1992). Indeed, we can elaborate the idea of social critique as having its provenance in the transformation of the language of politics, between 1250 and 1600 in Europe, from politics as the art of good government to politics as the reason of state. When this language changed, subtly at first and then later brazenly, government was no longer concerned with ruling the state according to reason and with justice. Rather, it became a study in how to successfully police and dominate a people. This transformation reached its most frightening apogee with the reproduction of the idea of the modern state in Africa.

It should be noted here, parenthetically, that social critique—the intellectual child of social theory and political philosophy—had and still has a lot to engage with. This is because the transformation of the language of politics to *raison d'état* was a theoretico-practical move made ready for the widespread transformation of modern society via industrialisation, the emergence of the nation-state, capitalist transformation of social relations, and the realignment between state and civil society, all in the nineteenth century (Rundell, 2003: 13). It is in this sense that social critique becomes a form of revolutionary framework for redirecting the trajectory of society back to the art of good government.

In this sense, social critique shares in the two senses of a revolution, both as a longing for a past form of social organisation (*à la* the 1776 American Revolution) and a desire to rebuild the society anew (*à la* the 1789 French Revolution).

To achieve its practical purpose, social critique must necessarily surmount the barriers of negative social manifestations that defy normative expectations about the progress of society. It does this primarily through dissent and contestation clothed in anger and outrage (Macamo, 2011). Anger and outrage are emotions which become socially meaningful within the context of the violation of normative expectations existing within what Macamo calls the "moral frames" of society. In other words, "this framework binds the actions of different individuals into amoral frame that enables them to interpret whatever occurs in interaction approvingly or disapprovingly" (ibid: 45). This recognition of a moral framework allows Macamo to elaborate the collective nature of social criticism or contention around the activities of social groups rather than individual critics. In other words, his elaboration of social criticism, within the space of contention, makes it a species of what MacAdam et al call "contentious politics" (2004: 4). Although he articulates a critique of the western notion of protest within the theoretical ambit of social movements, his objective is not to enunciate the place and role of an individual critic vis-à-vis that of a social group in the restoration of social order. Yet, his critique of the idea of social movement and its provenance in Africa offers us a neat heuristic framework to interrogate the utility of social criticism in Nigeria.

A social critic occupies an unenviable site in the social context. She, like Socrates, may decide to stand alone and face the wrath of a social framework already compromised. She may also be recognised as someone with the capacity to speak for or re-present the claims of those under the chains of domination. Finally, such a social critic may speak right from within the subaltern base itself. In this case, her voice is coextensive with that of the subordinated. But then, how does a social critic achieve this normative desideratum? What, within Macamo's register of social movement, makes an act of social contestation an act of social criticism? Where is the social critic coming from? Where is she going? How does she stand with respect to others? To answer these questions, we will appropriate Michael Walzer's insight into the condition for the possibility of social criticism, and then move on from there.

The significance of Walzer's contribution lies in his understanding of the relationship of social criticism to morality or moral argument within a society and the interpretative framework by which individuals come to the understanding of their society and to the idea of the right thing to do. Or, the implication we can draw from the theory that social criticism derives its critical edges from the condition motivating moral assent or disapproval. A social critic approaches her task from the perspective of interpretation. In other words, for the social critic, the interpretive path to criticism is much more adequate, rather than the need to discover the moral world. This is because interpretation allows us to judge what is already there—the social practice and the moral arrangement waiting to be interrogated. Interpretation becomes necessary in this context because the moral world, according to Walzer, lacks a design procedure:

> Morality, unlike politics, does not require executive authority or systematic legislation. We don't have to discover the moral world because we have always lived there. We don't have to invent it because it has already been invented — though not in accordance with any philosophical method. No design procedure has governed its design, and the result no doubt is disorganized and uncertain. It is also very dense: the moral world has a lived-in quality, like a home occupied by a single family over many generations, with unplanned additions here and there, and all the available space filled with memory-laden objects and artifacts. The whole thing, taken as a whole, lends itself less to abstract modeling than to thick description. Moral argument in such a setting is interpretive in character, closely resembling the work of a lawyer or judge who struggles to find meaning in a morass of conflicting laws and precedents (1985: 19).

It is this moral morass that the social critic confronts; it is what turns contestation into social criticism. Put in other words, when we do social critique, we are attempting to confront actually existing morality. Or, as Walzer puts it: "The critique of existence begins or can begin from principles internal to existence itself" (1985: 20).

Moral argument originates from the question: What is the right thing to do? This question is not as straightforward as it appears. This is because it calls our attention to the relationship between a global, thin morality that associates us with other humans by the fact of their humanity, and a local, thick morality which binds us with particular nation, culture or situation. However, as Walzer has argued, the force of that question resonates more within the local context of morality than the global. In other words, the right wording for that question is: What is the right thing *for us* to do? This question serves as the occasion for us to step into the untidy moral context and initiate a moral discourse which requires interpretation. According to Macamo,

> Moral argument addresses the question concerning what the right thing to do may be. In order to answer this question individuals have to consider the society in which they live, the means individuals have at hand, the opportunities open to them and many other structural aspects that constrain or enable action. According to Walzer, the answer has to do with the meaning which the way of life of a given community has to individuals. At the end of the deliberations individuals have to be able to say what the right thing to do is as far as they are concerned.... Social criticism, therefore, represents the different positions which individuals articulate and express in moral debate. Such positions reflect different understandings and interpretations of social order and the place which different individuals should have in it (2011: 54).

No doubt, this understanding of moral argument as interpretation raises a serious problem of how to agree on a theory which we take to be better than others. If there are several interpretations of a given moral order, which constitutes the correct one? We may not be able to answer this question, if by "correct" we mean a *definitive* interpretation to which everyone will assent. What differentiates one interpretation from another, says Walzer, is the *quality* of that interpretation, not its kind. We want to argue that the task of social critique is to hold up an interpretation of a moral order that is qualitatively compelling to other interpreters. However, there is a condition for the possibility of social critique that must give us pause. Social critique requires a measure of distance that makes such criticism possible in the first place. How then does the critic achieve that distance given that she is equally part of the "social" that invites criticism? Can she find a social Archimedean point? The figure of the critic that appeals to our expectation is that of the dispassionate, detached social critic that stands in judgmental distance to the rot in the society and unleashes her strictures without let. However, Walzer sketches a model of the social critic that is consistent not only with his understanding of "thick morality" but also his idea of moral argument. This more familiar social critic is, for Walzer,

> the local judge, the connected critic, who earns his authority, or fails to do so, by arguing with his fellows — who, angrily and insistently, sometimes at considerable personal risk (he can be a hero too), objects, protests, and remonstrates. This critic is one of us. Perhaps he has traveled and studied abroad, but his appeal is to local or localized principles; if he has picked up new ideas on his travels, he tries to connect them to the local culture, building on his own intimate knowledge; he is not intellectually detached. Nor is he emotionally detached; he doesn't wish the natives well, he seeks the success of their common enterprise. This is the style of Alexander Herzen among nineteenth-century Russians (despite Herzen's long exile from Russia), of Ahad Ha-am among East European Jews, of Gandhi in India, of Tawney and Orwell in Britain. Social criticism, for such people, is an internal argument. The outsider can become a *social* critic only if he manages to get himself inside, enters imaginatively into local practices and arrangements. But these critics are already inside. They see no advantage in radical detachment. If it suits their purposes, they can play at detachment, pretend to see their own society through the eyes of a stranger… (1985: 33-34).

The pertinent question now is how this connected critic would encounter the postcolonial Nigerian state and its social pathologies. How do we situate the connected social critic within the unique social pathologies that define postcoloniality in Nigeria?

# Encountering the Nigerian State

When we encounter the Nigerian State, in the real sense, we are encountering an absentee state that is simultaneously present and absent in our daily lives. The state's omnipresence derives from its inaugural imperative of order and domination, necessitated, as we noted earlier, by the transformation of the language of politics away from the art of good government to the science of domination. In Africa, this subjugating imperative became essential not only in the colonial geometry of power, but also in what Clapham calls "the policy of state preservation" (1985: 114) by African national leaders who were desperately bent on inheriting the colonial state structures rather than interrogating its provenance and value vis-à-vis the legitimate agitation of the people for socio-economic meaningfulness. Thus, the national question, rather than the social one,

> …provides the raison d'être of governing elites and the base from which their power derives. The more successful they can establish their position as gatekeepers…the stronger is their brokerage position, the better are the bargains they can strike on the one side or the other, and the greater the 'commission' they can extract in terms of personal benefits or freedom of political action (Clapham, 1985: 114).

The absence of the Nigerian state is an absence of responsibility and responsiveness arising from the state's loss of legitimation which usually stems from an internal dynamics mediated by what has been called a "normative condition of reconciliation" (Menkiti, 2002: 36) that propels the people to an unforced loyalty to the state. However, in the case of the Nigerian state, as well as most other states in Africa, its pursuit of the policy of state preservation promotes an external requirement by which a form of mechanical unity is imposed on the heterogeneous but unyielding constituents in Nigeria. This essentially constitutes the Nigerian state as "a space devoid of normative meaning" (ibid: 37). The policy of state preservation is a ploy to deny politics to Africans. Yet, existential dynamics of living in Africa gives the people the necessary motivation to encounter the state from various perspectives.

The interesting thing about the encounter is its paradoxical nature. In other words, the people find various means and ways to confront the Nigerian state, yet the modes of confrontation are conditioned by the Nigerian state itself. In the introduction to their book, *Encountering the Nigerian State*, Obadare and Adebanwi raise a poser:

> If the state is constituted as the ultimate power in society, how, following Foucault's…insight, do we understand the processes by which this power itself also constitutes, or forms, its subjects, providing the very conditions of the existence of the subjects and the trajectories of their desires and aspirations? If the state as the ultimate power forms its subjects, then the state is not merely what is opposed by elements, say in civil or political society, but strongly what they also depend on to authorize and actualize their existence…. What do people think of the state, and how do they act out their imagining of the state in their everyday existential materialities? (2010: 2)

Ekeh and Mbembe popularised the idea of the "publics" as a unique reaction to the dominance of the state in Africa. From the primordial public of Ekeh which is involved in a dynamic game of undermining the civic public which the state attempts to build, we come to the more robust "publics" involved in continuous efforts to "rewrite the mythologies of power" within a context where the postcolonial subject bargain with state power in a "conceptual marketplace" (Mbembe, 2001: 108).

What Mbembe calls "the *commandement*"—a specific imaginary of state power as an instrument of subjugation—generates excesses and magnificence. It is around these two factors that corruption and the personal appropriation of public offices obtain their rationality. To escape the permanent possibility of poverty in the postcolony, both the government functionaries and the masses become part of a framework of meaning that allows them to come to grip with their existential condition. How does this work, especially for the generality of the people? How do they come to term with the normative and developmental absence of the Nigerian state?

Nigerians operate within what Geertz calls culture as a web of significance which they have spun themselves and which helps them discover "who they think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it" (1999: 13). It is therefore within this meaning-making framework of culture—conditioned by religion and commonsense—that Nigerians attempt to make sense of the Nigerian society and its vicissitudes. In a broad term, we can argue that the Nigerian predicament generates for an average Nigerian a fundamental problem of suffering which is, from a perspective, unjustified. For Geertz,

> The vexation here is the gap between things as they are and as they ought to be if our conceptions of right and wrong make sense, the gap between what we deem various individuals deserve and what we see that they get… (1973: 106).

Thus, within their religious and commonsense perspective, the first order of business for Nigerians is not to deny their suffering, but to make it sufferable. Making it sufferable obviously cannot be within their original normative structures and guidelines which had been challenged. Therefore, second, they use their commonsense. This concept, within the Geertzian theoretical model, involves not only using one's senses, but "keeping them open [and] using them judiciously, intelligently, perceptively, reflectively [especially in] *coping with everyday problems in an everyday way with some effectiveness*" (1992: 224. Emphasis added).

Thus, when confronted with the suffering the Nigerian state inflicts on its citizens, the average Nigerian wises up and takes "sensible" decisions and steps on the basis of the realities s/he is facing! (Adebanwi, 2017). It is within the complex dynamics of existence that Nigerians can speak harshly to the corrupt officials in the corridors of power while at the same time partaking of the social pathologies thrown up by the dynamics of corruption and suffering. It is also this context that motivates social criticism in Nigeria and the comic and critical oeuvre of Gbenga Adeboye.

# Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Gbenga Adeboye and subaltern criticism

For us, Gbenga Adeboye and Fela Anikulapo-Kuti both represent the model of an insider critic proposed by Walzer. Furthermore, as we will later argue, especially with regards to Gbenga Adeboye, both of them manifest the complex and contradictory dynamics involved in social criticism from the inside. Of the two, Fela has a larger-than-life status basically because of the uniqueness of his militant and ritualised music. This militant tonality, and the accompanying recalcitrant exertions of signposting it, brings home sharply and irritatingly the message so well that Fela and his music were arrested incessantly (Afolayan and Falola, 2022: 15 - 16).

Fela's stature as a social critic is much more interesting. In *Arrest the Music!*, Olaniyan outlines the relationship between that strange order issued by an army officer to his men at Fela's shrine in one of the musician's several confrontations with the government, and the political nature of his music: "a suggestive conceptual key to approaching the music of Fela and the contexts of its production, circulation, and consumption. It reveals, for

example, the peculiar character of the relations between art, specifically oppositional music, and a postcolonial African state. It is also an inadvertent homage to that part of Fela's image as a musician that is most familiar to the world: the 'political'" (2004: 1-2). Fela's response to what Olaniyan calls the "postcolonial incredible" stems from a complicated response to the social anomie which gave his virulent critique its sense. Thus,

> That response appears to most people to be utterly peculiar and paradoxical. On the one hand is his irreproachable feat of a comprehensive venomous critique of both institutions and individuals he sees as causes and perpetuators of the reigning incredible social anomie. On the other hand is his far more reproachable cultivation of an antisocial counterculture of drugs and sex and a flamboyant cult of charisma that both fed on and were part and parcel of the anomie that Fela condemned. The one, in the extensive garish tableau of the postcolonial incredible it dramatizes with all its attendant social and psychological costs, brooks no notion of the incredible present that is not a transition. The other, in its indulgent countercultural pleasures irrespective of the social cost, already implicitly votes for its enabling order. The one is transcendentalist in aspiration—a powerful exploration of the wherewithal to surmount the incredible and its rule—while the other wallows in a sustaining relationship with it (ibid: 2).

Beyond this, we want to contend that his social critique serves an elitist purpose in the sense of presenting the voice of the people to power in manners and modes that they may not be familiar with. This elitism derives from the inauguration of Fela's music in what Olaniyan calls avant-pop and the highlife and jazz genre that supported it. The argument is that Fela never successfully transited to a more popular genre, in spite of the popularity of Afrobeat.

In an attempt to give the subaltern an occasion to speak, the intellectual, or our own social critic, ends up muffling that voice (Spivak, 1995: 28; Bhagwat and Arekar, 2018). By this fact, Fela and his music and lifestyle compromise the people's subalternity. On the contrary, we want to argue that Gbenga Adeboye inscribes himself in the context where the subaltern voice is to be heard. His comic-critical oeuvres are cast in the fissure and social specificities where the people ply their trade—as workers, loafers, touts, teachers, singers, prostitutes, artisans, healers, artists, and the like, and attempt mightily to project their voice to power. His subaltern criticism resonates right within the context of what Mbembe calls the conviviality that brings the oppressor and the oppressed together within the same power configuration and the same episteme (2001: 110).

According to Chow, the attempt by the subaltern to speak is doomed since the act of speaking itself is already a part of "an already well-defined structure and history of domination" (2003: 128). Thus, within the Nigerian postcolony and the convivial logic that ropes an average Nigerian and the government official into the same rapacious pursuit that decimates the state, the subaltern suppresses her own voice. Gbenga Adeboye's subaltern criticism can be situated within the deep realm of the moral foray, querying, urging, remonstrating, judging, objecting, protesting, warning, sighing…

Both Fela and Gbenga Adeboye, in spite of the differences between them, can be located within the context of what has been called transformative politics that impinges critically on "the values, processes, and institutions associated with 'conventional politics'" (Olarinmoye, 2010: 141). Their arts give them the opportunity for transformative resistance. In this transformative politics and resistance, comedy and the comic arts fare less significantly than music in the consideration of critical tools. It has been given less than serious attention, if they have been attended to at all. Obadare confirms that "the literature on laughter in Africa [is] marked by its distinctive rarity" (2009: 224; 2010: 4). The critical attention to the significance of Gbenga Adeboye's oeuvre is the worse for it.

# Gbenga Adeboye and the comic-critical art

The interest in Gbenga Adeboye derives most significantly from the relegation of comedy and the comic art to the lowest rung of interest in popular culture studies. Indeed, we can say that comedy is the subaltern art par excellence. In other words,

> Comedy has been judged as a form of low art, as a genre inferior to tragedy, as appropriate only to the trials and tribulations of the lower classes, whereas the comic has likewise been condemned for expressing taste base enough to warrant the recommendation of abstinence (Trahair, 2007: 15).

This summation of the supposed irrelevance of comic art could have been penned by Plato. In his reckoning, the laughter that is generated by comedy is a manifestation of the irrational, and hence to be discouraged everywhere in his Republic. Yet, as Lisa Trahair further argues, "…lack of attention to the theoretical basis for understanding the comic has meant that the effects of its operations remain unacknowledged and unknown" (ibid: 2). In other words, still following Plato's aversion, Nigeria is far from being Plato's envisioned Republic, and comedy is critical to our understanding of the postcolonial dynamics of Nigeria.

In Adeboye's oeuvres, we are forced to come to terms with the potential relationship between comedies, social criticism and socio-national existence and meaning (see Otiono, 2011). We therefore hope to exhume what can be called his *comic-critical* framework on the cusp of several questions: In what ways does the comic-critical emerge from within the interstice between reason and unreason; between the civil and the (c)rude? How does the comic-critical enjoin discourse as well as subversion? Or, how does it relate laughter to the buffoonery of the political machinery of domination? And how does it contest the conviviality between the oppressed and the oppressor? What roles can comedy, and Gbenga Adeboye's comic-critical art, play in the reawakening of the subaltern? What makes his comic-critical oeuvre a self-reflexive philosophy?

Specifically, the comic-critical art is located within the context of a self-reflexive philosophy within which the citizens as subalterns can challenge not only their oppressors but also their own complicity in the oppression. This, I argue, is the truly liberatory significance of comedy. To liberate, I argue that Gbenga Adeboye's comic-critical art employs an *enthymematic* capacity that leads inexorably from the pre-knowledge of the audience about their context and its dynamics to another realm of "unstated information, evidences, 'theories,' critiques, lamentations, assumptions and presuppositions" about that context (Afolayan, 2013: 168). Put in other words, comedies not only produce pleasurable feelings, they equally possess the capacity to jolt painful memories. However, the enthymematic character of the comic-critical art of Gbenga Adeboye, specifically its comic dimension, constitutes its greatest advantage as a form of social criticism in Nigeria. His jokes and social commentaries not only delight and censure, they also produce unexpected outcome that strengthens his original intention as a subaltern social critic.[1] It is however the critical component of the comic-critical, on the other hand, that undermines Gbenga Adeboye's stature as a social critic. This is because his political commentaries abandoned the enthymematic capacity for a frontal attack on the social pathologies in Nigeria. But Gbenga Adeboye was not intellectually prepared to make this confrontation; he was not able to achieve the internal coherence that would have made his comedy complements and supplements his critique of the Nigerian state.

Until his death, Adeboye was an enduring presence on the comedy and music circuit in Nigeria, and more so in the social and political imagination of (South-western) Nigerians. His comedies, which began in the 80s, became the inaugural forerunner to the contemporary stand up comedies dotting the Nigerian popular culture scene. He was a

[1] Indeed, the word "delight" has a double entendre here. It derives from the Latin *delectare*, meaning to entice ironically into some unexpected outcomes.

lone and lonely ranger at commencement. But the then Radio Lagos offered him a unique opportunity to offer the urban populace a regular subaltern staple that stave socio-economic depression off a bit. Since the word "comic" derives from the Greek *komikos*—translated as "revel"—comedy and the comic art provide one last point by which the subalterns can stay in touch with their besieged humanity.

The significance of Adeboye lies in the two dimensions of his comic-critical oeuvres: first, comedy serves an entertainment function; yet, second, this entertainment function is also inherently a political agenda that serves to confront the state formation and what Mbembe calls the *commandement*. In Adeboye's oeuvres, we hear the resonance of the subaltern's groaning as well as an incessant and locally powered diatribe against the banalities of power. His enduring popularity is a function of his deep mastery of not only the tenets of the three religions in Nigeria (Christianity, Islam and tradition African religion) as well as their scriptural tonalities, but also an in-depth understanding of the Yorùbá cultural heritage (especially Yorùbá oral aesthetics), and dexterity with the linguistic mimicry of the various Nigerian languages and attitudes. All these give him a serious purchase on the consciousness of the subaltern as well as enabling him to grasp the issues involved in socio-cultural and political happenings in Nigeria. This insinuates his oeuvres into a deeper task of what Walzer calls cultural elaboration and affirmation (1985: 34). Consider, for instance, a typical way he introduces himself: Prince Gbenga Adeboye—Fúnwọntán (literally: "dazzle them"); Alhaji Pastor Olúwo (traditional priest); MC Wonder; Jengbetiẹlẹ̀ I; Apa'gun p'ọ̀tẹ̀ of Yorubaland (grand pacifist of Yorubaland); Àbẹ̀fẹ́;[2] Amúlùúdùn of London;[3] Great Grandfather for Oduology (GGFO);[4] International Outstanding Comedian and Classical Musician (IOACCM), and so on.

In this study, we will be confronting Gbenga Adeboye's mature composition. This requires an explanation. He began his career in the early 80s as a comedian at a time when stand-up comedy was far from the social consciousness. In fact, Gbenga Adeboye, we argue, inaugurated stand-up comedy in Nigeria and heralded the coming of the more contemporary comedians like Ali Baba, Basket Mouth, I Go Die, Julius Agwu, AY and others. Gbenga Adeboye's unique status straddles the interregnum between the old non-stand-up comedians like Jaguar, Bàbá Sùwé, Lúkúlúkú, Alúwẹ, Chief Zebrudaya, and the more contemporary ones. That status gives him not only a comparative importance but also a theoretical significance into the imperative of comedy beyond its obvious entertainment value. Beyond the Radio Lagos beginning, Gbenga Adeboye matured steadily in the consciousness of his mainly south-western audience in Nigeria.

A critical analysis of his oeuvre reveals a three-fold framework made up of the strictly comedic (found variously in albums like *Different Strokes*, *Versatility*, *Stand Up Comedy Extravaganza 1*, *Asánlayé*, *London Yabis*, and *Exposure*—these comedies consist of the regular one-off jokes and the extended, episodic narratives built around the characters of "Itú Bàbá Ìta: the exploits of a rascally dandy" and "Laísì Abésùpínlẹ̀": ("Laísì who shares a plot of land with Èṣù" ); the social homilies (*Stand Up Comedy Extravaganza 2*, *Supremacy*, *Pàsí Pàànrọ̀*, and *Ayé Tóto*); and the political commentaries (*Ìjìnlẹ̀ Ọ̀rọ̀ Láti Orí Itẹ́ Mímọ́*, *Ọ̀rọ̀ Sùnnùkùn 1&2*). This framework also essentially demonstrates a gradual but steady progression, even enrichment, from pure entertainment to engaged socio-political commentary. This progression encompasses a singular socio-political agenda with a two-fold projection possessing an internal coherence: Nigerians are responsible for the Nigerian predicament. Nigerians, in this context, appropriately refer to the citizens in their social environment and the government. The comic-critical framework therefore serves to bring both under stricture.

To do this, Gbenga Adeboye deployed an awesome knowledge not only of the traditional belief system represented especially by the *Ifá* corpus, but also a deep

[2] Àbẹ̀fẹ́ is literally "the one you beg to love."
[3] Amúlùúdùn translates as merrymaker
[4] "Odulology" is a play on "odù" or fable.

knowledge of the Christian and Islamic scriptures, as well as a working acquaintance with Nigerian history. Religion and religious intolerance play a serious role in his diagnosis of the Nigerian situation and the parochialism of an average Nigerian. Thus, if this religious parochialism and intolerance, resulting from an absolutist appropriation of God and salvation, could be undermined, then we would have achieved much in dislodging the albatross of disunity. On the other hand, there is, as should be expected, an elite-leadership dimension to his diagnosis of the problem.

Gbenga Adeboye's take-off point for social criticism can be located in the Yorùbá ethical discourse concerning *ìwà* (character), *ọmọlúwàbí* (a good person) and specifically, *ààbọ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* (few words). The latter intersects the former in the Yorùbá aphorism: *ààbò òrò la a so fún omolúàbí, bo ba de inú re aa di odidi* (few words are sufficient for the wise). Michael Afolayan argues that the abbreviated phrase, *ààbò òrò*, is a multidisciplinary concept that straddles education, oral tradition and sociolinguistics (2005: 166). He however emphasises the educational utility of the word and its place in the sustenance of a unique Yorùbá educational system as well. According to him,

> This form of education is better depicted in the traditional philosophical cliché, *ààbò ọ̀rọ̀*, or its correspondent synonymic phrase, *ẹ̀lá lọ̀rọ̀*, that is, words in all ramifications, are puzzles and mysteries that must be unravelled in order for them to convey the desired semantic effect. The outcome of this unravelling is brevity. In essence, brevity of utterances is the theoretical framework on which the idea of Yorùbá education is anchored (ibid: 168).

In this sense, Gbenga Adeboye becomes an educator whose entire oeuvre constitutes an *ààbò òrò* comically and critically hurled at the rot not only in the Yorùbá societies in the South-west, but also in the entire Nigerian state. Thus, these ethically-charged words are not only evocative; they equally possess a compelling force. They are meant to consistently harangue us back to good character (*ìwà rere*). *Ààbọ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* is supposed to lead to some deep and troubling reflection (*àrọ̀jìnlẹ̀*) that would gradually and eventually lead to the moral rehabilitation of the society.

In Gbenga Adeboye's comic-critical oeuvre, the comedy sketches take on the form of *ààbọ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* that self-reflexively engages the minds of the listeners while also entertaining them. In these comedies, we are shown several pictures of our uncouthness, compromises, illiteracy, arrogance, cruelty, contradictions, other social complexities and practices as well as the panoply of human foibles. Let us consider, for instance, two of what we can call his diasporic jokes, "Kàsíimù" and "Mr Linkoln". These two jokes are contrasts in the sense that "Kàsíimù" narrates the bumbling awkwardness of a gluttonous Nigerian who visits America for the first time. "Mr Linkoln", on the other hand, tells of a Nigerian who has been in America for so long that he hardly remembers what "home" is like. Consider "Kàsíimù" first. Gbenga Adeboye narrates that he goes for an outing in America with Kàsíimù, with the knowledge that the latter is a glutton. But on this particular occasion, even Gbenga Adeboye himself is surprised to the point of comic excess. He is asked to pray by the white hosts, and as they all closed their eyes, Gbenga sights Kàsíimù rearranging the cutleries to give himself eating advantage especially with the bigger spoons! As usual, the comic muse comes straight to Gbenga Adeboye's rescue:

> "I will like to pray in my mother's tongue."
>
> "You're welcome Benga. Go on!" One of the hosts replies, with all eyes closes.
>
> "Kàsíimù! Kàsíimù!! Kàsíimù!!!
>
> "Ẹ'mélòó ni mo pè ọ́?
> ["How many times did I call you?"— Kàsíimù signals three]
>
> "Kò ní dáa fún ẹ!
> [It will not be well with you!]

"Oúnjẹ ti b'ayé é jẹ́!
[You are so gluttonous!]

"Ṣó o mọ̀ pé bẹ́ẹ̀ náà lo ṣe ní MacDonald lánàá, tó o ń jẹ pizza mọ́ burger; tí wọ́n ní ṣé a jọ wá ni, tí mo ní mi ò rí ọ rí. Tó o ń kó creamu won s'ápò. O tún dé l'ónìí?
[You did a similar thing at MacDonald yesterday; mixing pizza with burger and stealing the creams so much so that I had to deny knowing you! You have started again today?]
"Wòó, a popo on r'owo ro'ri o, tue o!
[Incantation in the next four lines]

"Ṣọ́'ara ẹ o. Ṣé o fẹ́ tẹ gbogbo Yorùbá ló'jú àwọn Òyìnbó ni? Wọn a sì ni gbogbo Yorùbá lalá jẹ'jù.
[Do you want to shame the Yoruba, and make us a race of gluttons in front of the whites?]

"Ẹni ó mu kọ́ọ̀pù tíì mẹ̀tàdínlọ́gbọ̀n, o sì ń jà ràn-ìn-ràn-ìn lára wọn. Ìwọ ó tun dá'míì sí'lẹ̀.
[The person that drank twenty-seven cups of tea is still battling with the stigma. Do you want to complicate the issue?][5]

"Ó dáa, tí wọ́n ò bá wá di'jú f'áduúrà ń kọ́ nísinyìí?
[Now, imagine they didn't close their eyes in prayer!]

"Wòó, Kàsíimù, o ò ní bámi jáde l'Áméríkà yìí mọ́ o!
[Look, Kasimu, I will refuse to go out with you any longer!]
…..

"Ju síbí ọwọ́ rẹ nì sílẹ̀ kíá, kí n má summarise èpè s'órí ẹ!
[Drop those spoons immediately before I begin cursing you!]

"In Jesus name I pray…. Amen!"

The resounding "Amen" that followed the "prayer" demonstrates that those at the table had no clue whatsoever about what just happened. It is almost certain that they were lost in the exotic spiritual prayer, and thought all was well. And all was really well when they eventually opened their eyes, and probably burst into applause at such a wonderful invocation!

The other diasporic joke—"Mr Linkoln"—narrates the pathetic story of a Nigerian practically lost abroad. His inability to come to term with his birth name antedates the contemporary identity problem amongst Nigerian youths. Gbenga Adeboye met "Mr Linkoln" several times, and according to him, "Linkoln" is taken by his—again—exotic appearance (and definitely by the faint memories of "home" and what used to be). Thus, this particular day, there is another encounter:

"Hey man! You bad, man! I love your attire! Oh guy, how're doing?"
"Not bad! And you?"
"Oh, I'm fine boy!"
"My name is Gbenga; I'm from Africa."
"Oh yeah? I'm from Africa too. My name is 'Linkoln'."
"'Linkoln'? You mean 'Abraham Lincoln'?"
"No. I mean 'Linkoln.' 'Linkoln'."
"Can you spell it?"
"Oh sure. L-É-K-A-N"
"Oh God! That is LÉKAN!"
"Yeah! Linkoln Orimogeje."
"'Ori…' what? Can you please spell that surname?"
"Yeah! O-R-Í-M-Ó-Ò-G-Ù-N-J-Ẹ́."

[5] This is a sly anecdotal reference to Sir Tafawa Balewa, first and only Nigerian Prime Minister (1957-1966), who allegedly drank 27 cups of tea because he was unaware of the table etiquette of tuning the cup face down after drinking a cup of tea.

"That is ORÍMÓÒGÙNJÉ! You are LEKAN ORÍMÓÒGÙNJÉ!"
"Oh boy! You bet, man! You stupid dawg! You got it right, man! You still have that accent! You drive me crazy!"
"Mr Lékan Orímóògùnjé, how long you been here?"
"Thirty-four, thirty-five years."
"Thirty-four, thirty-five?"
"Yeah."
"You built any house back home?"
"No."
"Your parents still alive?"
"I don't know."
"You plan to go back home?"
"I can't say, Gbenga, I can't say!"
"You can't say? Well, Mr Lékan, from which of the states are you from?"
"'Scuse me? What do you mean 'state'?"
"[I mean] Your state; state of origin?"
"C'mon, c'mon, Gbenga! You're kidding me, you're kidding me! You think I forgot home? Nothing like that, man! I still remember vividly. I'm from Western region."
"Western region, ke?!" [Western region?]

In both jokes, Adeboye was critically concerned with the idea of "home" and the protection of its boundaries. Of course, within the context of the diaspora, "home" is the African homeland; and more specifically, "home" is the Yoruba sociocultural territory and its signifiers everywhere across the globe. This understanding of home becomes a significant item in Gbenga Adeboye's understanding of the world, and the relationship of the Yoruba to the larger national space in Nigeria.

The framework for the social homilies is equally comic-critical, with a bit of an emphasis on the critical dimension which would get more severe by the time we arrive at the political commentaries. Yet, the comedy is still not missing. *In Stand Up Comedy Extravaganza 2*, we have two representative social homilies that do justice to the multi-talented status of Gbenga Adeboye. The first is titled "Some Minutes with God", and it is a dramatised sermon combined with a translator that provides the comic relief with his atrocious and ingenious (mis)translation, code-mixing and switching, and murderous but hilarious transliteration. The translator is not only the comedian, but also the tongue of the subaltern. There are several interjections even from the "preacher" himself—represented by the exclamation, "Ehn?" and chuckles arising from the subaltern translation.

Ìṣẹ́jú díẹ̀ pẹ̀lú Ọlọ́run
Some minutes with God

A dúpẹ́ l'ọ́wọ́ Ọlọ́run tí ó múwa rí ọjọ́ òní
We thank God who let us see today.

…
Lónìí, ohun t'óun ó bá ẹ s'ọ̀rọ̀ lé lórí ni nínì tálákà lára
[My sermon concerns the poor and the wretched]
My sermon for you today is the pursue of a poor man
["Ehn?"—"Sorri, giving masses problem"]

…

Tàni tálákà?
[Who is the poor?]
Who is the suffers man?

Ẹni tí ojú ń pọ́n
[The person that is afflicted]
The man with red face

["Ehn?"—"Go on, go on…]
…
Àlùfáà ń san'ra, ọmọ ìjọ ń rù
[The cleric enjoys while the members grow lean]
The pastor belleful, member is HIV virus

Gbogbo ẹni tó ń ni tálákà lára
Anybody that is giving masses problem

Ègún Olúwa ń bẹ l'órí yín
[The curses of the Lord rest on you]
E no go better for them!
["Ehn?"—Sorri; God curses are on you]
……

Ditarónómì 24, ẹsẹ 14 si 15, ó ní ìwọ kò gbọdọ̀ ní alágbàṣe lára tí ń ṣe tálákà àti alaíní
[Don't afflict the poor and the afflicted]
E say don't hammer your worker, the poor man and the empty handed
…..

Suratul dhuha na sọ bẹ́ẹ̀ nínú Korani
Suratul mention by the pastor also say it

Sura 93 ní kí a lọ
Sura chapter 93 [verse 6 to 11]

Ese ikefa si ikankola, o ni: *Alam yegi dika faa wa*
[verses 6 to 11: Did he not find you an orphan and give you shelter and care?]
Koran!

*Wawa jada ka dola faa daa*
[And he found you wandering and gave you guidance]
Koran again!

*Wawa ja da ka ai lan fa ji naa*
[And he found you in need and made you independent]
Koran still waxing strong in pastor's mouth

*Wa mo sai la fa la teni yar*
[Therefore, treat not the orphan with harshness, nor repulse him who asks; but the bounty of your Lord rehearse and proclaim!]

Koran landed safely and finally

In a similar track titled "Wáàsí ìjìnlẹ̀ (Dandan ni Ẹ̀san)" (Profound Sermon—Retribution is certain), Gbenga Adeboye takes on the persona of a stern, non-comic Islamic cleric with all the inflection, aggressive posturing and Koranic interjections to further address social ills.

With the political commentaries, Gbenga Adeboye enters a complex territory that challenges his reputation as a social critic. This will appear surprising since the political would seem to be just a logical step away from the social. As it were, most of the social homilies were already pregnant with political intimations. Yet, it is at this political juncture that Gbenga Adeboye's comic-critical framework abandons the enthymematic capacity of comedies and becomes blatantly confrontational. This is because these commentaries themselves undermined the objectives they were meant to achieve.

Earlier on, we made the point that Gbenga Adeboye was a patriot of some sort. His entire oeuvre is addressed to Nigerians, and his *telos* is the unity of Nigeria. He had two rallying points for achieving that: religion and ethnicity. His appellation as "Alhaji Pastor Oluwo" as well as his scriptural understanding of the three religions, is meant to signal

the possibility of their commensurability and hence mutual relationship. His home video, *Oni ni* (It is Today), preaches the same message of religious ecumenism. However, his attempt to address the ethnic dimension of Nigeria's predicament ensnares him in the same issue. This is because Gbenga Adeboye comes to the national reconciliation table with a Yorùbá ethnic agenda that is partially responsible for that predicament in the first place. For instance, in the diasporan joke, "Kàsíimù", Gbenga Adeboye chastises "Kàsíimù" not because of the danger of putting Nigeria in a bad light, but for the possible embarrassment to the Yorùbá race. And he does that with a poke at a Hausa who was alleged to have drunk twenty-seven cups of tea because he supposedly lacked the knowledge of British tea etiquette.

This tension between the Yorùbá agenda and the unity of Nigeria as a nation essentially defines the political commentaries of Gbenga Adeboye. We will interrogate *Oro Sunnukun* and *Ijinle Ọ̀rọ̀ Láti Orí Ìtẹ́ Mímọ́*. He commenced *Ọ̀rọ̀ Sùnnùkùn 1* with a newspaper report from one Alhaji Abdul Kásúmù from Ìlọrin calling for the dethroning of two Yorùbá monarchs—Ooni of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ and Ogunsua of Modákẹ́kẹ́—over their failure to put an end to the Ifẹ̀-Modákẹ́kẹ́ crisis (1997-2000). This conflict between the two erstwhile ethnic neighbours, as well as the many others then, was a constant testimony to the conflicted nature of postcolonial Nigeria. Gbenga Adeboye therefore offers a critique of Nigerian politicians and government, using the Ifẹ̀-Modákẹ́kẹ́ crisis as a foil. He begins with a subtle castigation of the Yorùbá elders and leaders:

> Mo kọ́kọ́ ki gbogbo ẹni tó ti dásí ìjà náà láti ẹ̀yìn wá pé, "Ẹ kú àtúntò o".
> [I salute all those that have been involved in resolving the conflict]
>
> Mo kí Ọlọ́lá wa tó s'ọ̀rọ̀ pé, "Ẹ ku abi."
> [I also greet our honourable who initiated the discourse]
>
> Mo sì kí ìlú méèèjì pé, "Ẹ kú làásìgbò."
> [I salute the two towns on the crisis]
>
> Mo kí Olú-ayé Àdìmúlà pé, "Ẹ kú b'Ọ̀lọ́run ti pe ori."
> [I greet the Ooni of Ife]
>
> Mo kí Kábíyèsí Ogunsua pe, "Ẹ kú ìgba kádàrá."
> [I greet King Ogunsua of Modákẹ́kẹ́]
>
> Ọlọ́run yóò bawa fòpin sí rìtìrìtì ọ̀hún láti òní lọ àti títí láílái
> [The owner of heaven will help put an end to the crisis from now and forever]
>
> Ṣé ẹ̀yin bàbá wa tí ya gbàgbé ọ̀rọ̀ àgbà tẹ́ ẹ fi bọ́ a ni?
> [Have you our fathers forgotten the words of the elders that you fed us with?]
>
> Pé: B'íná ò l'áwo, kò lè g'òkè odò.
> [That: If fire does not have a secret ally, it cannot cross a river]
>
> Iná ìjà yìí tí l'áwo ló ṣe m'ókè odò gùn tí ó re yìí.
> [This conflict sure has a secret ally, and that is why it is soaring]
>
> Ahaha, ṣe b'ọ́mọdé l'ẹ̀yin ní í wo'wájú tó bá ṣu'bú?
> [Ah! Didn't you say the child looks forward when s/he falls?]
>
> Kíló wá dé tá ń sorò bí èwe?
> [Why then are we behaving like children?]
>
> Tí a à ti ẹ̀ w'ẹ̀yìn wò nígbà kankan?
> [And we refuse at any time to look backward as elders?]
>
> Yoòbá, a sì fíná s'órí òrùlé sùn gbáà!

[And the Yorùbá practically went to bed with their house ablaze!]

Ọlọ́run má'jẹ́ k'ógun ó wọ̀'lú ni o.
[May the owner of heaven forbid war]

Àwọn ìbọn tí í mú ni gun kẹ̀kẹ́ iná d'ọ́dọ̀ Olódùmarè, tí èniyàn ò fi níí sàárẹ́ ń bẹ l'ọ́wọ́ Íbò; tí'le to'na kun keke!
[The Igbo possess terrifying armament that can destroy without a trace]

Ọrun àti ọfà tó ń kó ìfun inú ẹni mì bíi kìnìún ó ti ń retí ìjà l'ákàtà ọmọ Gàmbàrí.
[Bow and arrow are also at the ready among the Hausa]

Ọmọ Yoòbá ò ní àpólà igi lásán o.
[The Yorùbá do not even have a mere piece of wood]

Kàkà káa sì fi'mọ̀ s'ọ̀kan, ara wa la tún ń pa.
[And rather than unite, we have turned on one another]

Wọ́n wá f'ọwọ́ l'érán, wọ́n ń bá wa bu'po s'ínú wa—làìlàì!
[The others are now waiting and watching, and provoking the in-fighting]

We have here the Yorùbá agenda and the ethnic comparative framework by which Gbenga Adeboye meant to pursue it. The Yorùbá are either vilified or praised based on their perceived assertiveness or lukewarmness vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Gbenga Adeboye was essentially held captive by the stereotypical ethnic discourse in the popular consciousness of Nigerians. "Gambari" or "Mọ́là" (a corruption of "mallam"—the Hausa word for a teacher) is a synecdochic but pejorative reference to the Hausa, just as "ọmọ ńna" refers to the Igbo.

He identified three reasons for the Nigerian crises:

Ọ̀tẹ̀ àti ìjà tí i ń w'aye káàkiri yìí ò dédé rí bẹ́ẹ̀
[The crises around are not arbitrary]

Ìdí kìn-ín ní l'ebi tí ń pa wá;
[The first cause for these crises is hunger that afflicts us]

Ìdí kejì ni pé ó l'ọ́wọ́ ìjọba orí oyè nínú ni;
[The second cause is the complicity of government]

Ìdí kẹta l'èpè tí wọ́n ní Kábíyèsí kan gbe gbogbo Yoòbá ṣẹ́!
[The third is the alleged curse inflicted on the Yorùbá by an ancient King]
….

Ebi ti ìjọba fi ń pa'lú ni ò jẹ́ àwọn onílà ó d'áwọ́ ogun dúró….
[The pervasive hunger has stalled the end of the crisis]

Ẹ jẹ́ a ti ẹ pé 100 million ni wa l'órílẹ̀ èdè yìí,
[Let us even assume we are just 100 million in population]

T'ẹnli kọ̀kan bá gba 10 million, ká pín-in kári; séngì tí yóò kù kòlè tán
[If each of us is given 10 million, we'll still have more than enough]

Èyi ọ̀hún nínú owó ọmọ Abacha lásán tó ni bàbá òun máá ń fún òun l'ówó oúnjẹ oṣù kan

[And I'm even referring to what Abacha gives his son as monthly allowance]

Ojúlówó àkẹ́bàjẹ́ ọmọ ọlọ́pẹ́—lahila!
[A thoroughly spoilt child, indeed!]

Ṣebí ẹ sì ti gb'owó ọ̀hun; t'ebi tún ṣe wha jẹ́ o?
[Now that we have recovered the money, we are we still hungry?]

Note two immediate things. The first is the presumption that an ancient curse on the Yorùbá race constitutes part of the Nigerian predicament. Second, the primitive economics that would enrich all Nigerians with enough monies left for some other national expenses! The second reason he gave for the turmoil in the land is, again, the familiar trajectory of government, and politicians', complicity in bad governance. Here, Gbenga Adeboye was at his acerbic best. He inveighed against the politicians and their excesses, using the combined invective strength of the three religions at his command. He especially singled out the lawmakers and the billions of naira that went into servicing their greed. They got allowances for furniture, reading, phone calls, entertainment, sitting, severance and life allowances, and even burials and religious celebrations! Gbenga Adeboye singled out Chuba Okadigbo, the late former President of the Nigerian Senate (1999-2000), for serious invective, especially for the alleged N78 million supposedly expended on Salah celebration. Here again, like the economic recommendation, we are faced with another political solution to the predicament:

B'ínú ìjọba bá yọ́ sí ìjà Modákẹ́kẹ́ àti Ifẹ̀ ni,
[If the government is indeed disposed to ending the Ife-Modakeke crisis]

Kílọ́ burú nínú pé, "Ok, ẹ̀yin Ifẹ̀: local government yín rè é, Ẹ koo'bi yi; 35 million re, ẹ wa sí i."
[There is nothing amiss in saying: "Ife, this is your local government, and here is 35 million naira. Look for more to sustain it']

"Modákẹ́kẹ́: local government yín rè ẹ́; 35 million rèé , ẹ wá sí i."
[The same goes for Modakeke]

Ṣebí yóò ku 8 million fun olókèlè bí orí àbíkú kó fi j'ágbó ní'jọ́ kan soso.
[That would still leave the glutton with N8 million to expend on eating a sheep in just a day]

Wọn ò ṣè'yun o; àpapín owó ni wọ́n ń bá kiri.
[They refused to do this; rather, they greedily shared money]

Ọlọ́run yóò jẹ gbogbo wọn ní'yà t'ó gb'óná,
[The owner of heaven will make them suffer]

Àfàìmọ̀ bí ń bá fi nnkan bí agbára bá'nu ni èpè yìí ò fi ní mú wọn.
[And this curse will surely affect them!]

At this juncture of his comic-critical oeuvre, Gbenga Adeboye had left the safe cultural turf of *ààbọ̀ ọ̀rọ̀* for the complex political landscape where more is needed for effective criticism especially in terms of adequate political knowledge. The primitive economics of the preceding narrative thus combined a ludicrous knowledge of *realpolitik* to portray him as an ineffectual subaltern critic. When we eventually arrive at the third reason for the crisis in Nigeria, Gbenga Adeboye the patriot is no longer recognisable; we now have a stark and outright Yorùbá ethnic jingoist:

Ẹ̀yin bàbá mi n'Ílé Ifẹ̀, ní Modákẹ́kẹ́, jákè jádò ilẹ̀ Oòduà o!
[All my fathers at Ile-Ife, Modakeke, and all over Yorubaland]

Moní ìdí kẹ̀ta t'ógun ò fi dúró—èpè ni!
[The third reason for this crisis is the curse!]

Ẹ gbọ́, ṣé òótọ́ ni Ọba kan bùú jó ìran Yoòbá l'áyé àtijọ́ wípé ẹnu wa ò ní kò láílái; ọ̀tá la ó máa b'ára wa ṣe?

[Is it true that a certain ancient king placed a curse of disunity on the Yorùbá race?]

Èmi ò bá'tàn, mi ò sì tí ì bá'rọ́bá re o.
[I certainly didn't know history, and I am not certain of the narration]

Àmọ́, bó bá jẹ́ bẹ́ è ni, ẹ jẹ a ro'nú, ká wá nǹkan ṣe sí ni i.
[But if it is true, then we ought to reflect and find a solution]
…..

Bí Modákẹ́kẹ́ ló bá renti Hausa ọlọ́fà láti k'ọjú Ifẹ̀;
[Is Modakeke renting Hausa archers to confront Ife?]

Bí Ifẹ̀ ló bá renti Hausa ọlọ́fà láti k'ọjú Modáẹ́lẹ…
[Is Ife doing a similar thing?]

Ṣebí àwọn fẹ́ gbé wa jó'ná tẹ́lẹ̀ ni, k'ató máa tún f'epo rara dúró t'iná?
[Don't forget these people are already plotting our downfall]

Owó billions ti Abacha kó pamọ́, ẹ̀yin ṣe b'ó fẹ́ fi dì'bò ni?
[The billions of naira Abacha stashed away is not meant for election…]

Ó fẹ́ fi ja'gun ni, orí ló yọ wá!
[It is meant for the prosecution of war against us; we were just so lucky!]
…..
Ẹ̀wà tí ń pa gbogbo Íbò àti Yoòbá níjọ́ òní i,
[The killer beans that ravaged both the Igbo and Yorùbá the other time…]

Ṣé ẹ mọ àwé oní tírélà tó kó o wá bí?
[Don't you know the trailer magnate that imported it?][6]

Wọ́n ti po nǹkan mọ́ ọn ni! Ṣebí òun nìkan ló gbọ́dọ̀ kó rice wọ̀'lú.
[Don't forget he's the only one with the import license; so he took dangerous liberty with the beans!]

Hausa kan o kú'kú ẹ̀wà l'ókè Ọya o!
[No Hausa died of beans poisoning in the North!]

Ẹ ẹ̀ jẹ á ronú!
[It is time for us to deeply reflect!]
…..
Ọmọ Íbò, wọn ní ẹgbẹ́ ajàngbara ti wọn o. Hausa ní ti ẹ̀ ò.
[The Igbo and the Hausa have their militant groups]

…
Wọ́n wá mba àwọn OPC jẹ́, inú Yoòbá tún ń dùn
[Yet, when O[odua] P[eople] C[ongress] is castigated, the Yorùbá rejoice]

Awólọ́wọ̀ ti lọ, Abíọ́lá ti kú, Ọbásanjọ́ j'oko lé òwu ìkórun.
[Awolowo is gone; Abiola is dead; and Obasanjo is sitting complacent]
…..

In *Oro Sunnukun 2*, he celebrated the end of the Ife-Modakeke crisis, as well as other ethnic clashes that dominated the Nigerian political space then. He also celebrated the impeachment of Chuba Okadigbo. Yet, Nigeria is a crisis template that is emblematic of a permanent possibility of problems. Thus, Gbenga Adeboye had to again confront, in narration, the emergence of democracy and the MKO Abiola "June 12" political saga. Again, the tension between the national and the ethnic reared its head as Gbenga Adeboye congratulated Nigerians on the nascent democracy. His commentary on the

[6] This is a straight reference to Alhaji Aliko Dangote, the business mogul.

conflict, expectedly, could only be meaningful for him within the ethnic framework. Abiola was, for him, largely a Yorùbá hero compromised by an ethno-national conspiracy against the Yoruba. In a song refrain preceding his narration of the Nigerian democracy, Gbenga Adeboye commented:

Yorùbá nìí kìí fẹ́ b'ínú
[The Yorùbá do not get angry]

Yorùbá nìí kìí fẹ́ ó yí'wọ́
[The Yorùbá do not disrupt]

Ẹ̀yà kan ń dúró dè wá ṣá
[Yet, one race is lying in ambush]

Wọn ò kọ'hun tó máa dà o.
[Not minding the outcome]

Àwọn ló lọ b'óyìnbó sọ,
[It is that race that conspired with the whites]

Tí'kú MK fi dò'hun.
[And sealed the death of MKO]

Wọ́n pa wá l'Ábíọ́lá tán, a dẹ̀ tún jọ ń sọ'kún.
[They killed Abiola, yet we mourned him together]

Bẹ́ ò bá fẹ́ k'ilẹ̀ yí pín,
[If you do not want this land to fragment]

Ẹ tètè fi'nú kò'nú;
[Then you better get into conference]

Bí a ò rí bẹ́ẹ̀, à ń tan'ra wa ni.
[If we don't, then we are deceiving one another]

À ń sún wàhálà síwájú.
[We are only postponing the doomsday]

Àwa ló fẹ́ kí Nàìjá gb'éri;
[We—the Yoruba—desire that Nigeria will rise]

Àwọn kan ń bẹ wọn ò rán'yàn o!
[Yet there are some who just do not care!]

Wọn tà wá l'ẹ́rú f'óyìnbó,
[They sold us into slavery to the whites]

Kán lè dúró sí'pò ni
[Just to satisfy their yearning for power]

And then, he followed right immediately with an exhortation on why the nascent democracy cannot afford to be aborted, especially by legislators and politicians who are concerned only with their own greed and parochial desires.

Ẹ̀yin adàlúrú, ẹ máa ṣe o.
[You that disrupt the nation; watch it]

Ẹ ma ge'jo democracy ni're, ki o ma f'eyin sa'gi o.
[Beware about truncating the nascent democracy]

Ṣé ẹ  mọ̀ pé igi tí ó bá f'eyin san naa kii je'aaye mo.
[Once it is truncated, we are done for]

Àwọn asíwájú t'Ọ́lọ́run bá yọ̀nda fún wa, àdúrà ni o.
[The leaders we get is the result of prayers]

Ohun tí ò tó l'ónìí, ń bọ̀ wá pọ̀ l'ọ́la,
[What seems difficult today foretells abundance tomorrow…]

Tí Nigeria yóò padà di ilú tó ń sàn fún wàrà àti fún oyin.
[When Nigeria becomes the land flowing with milk and honey]

Ẹ kọ ọ́'lẹ̀ kí ẹ kọ'rúkọ mi ti n di…
[Note these words, and affix my signature to it]

Ẹ fi'tàn Nigeria àtẹ̀hìnwá kọ́'gbọ́n o, táa gb'óhun àdúrà s'ókè lé Shagari;
[Remember the Nigerian past, and our supplication against Shagari]

L'Olúwa bá fún wa ní Buhari ati Idiagbon.
[And then the Lord answered us, and gave us Buhari and Idiagbon]

L'àwọn yẹn ń bọ́'lu yó, ni wọ́n tún ń san gbèsè tí a jẹ…
[These ones fed us and paid our debts…]

L'a tún kígbe, "Olúwa, nooooo. Eléyìí ti ndi'jú mọ́'rí tún lée; fún wa lẹ́lẹ́rin-ín ẹ̀yẹ! Kanjú fo yìí ò ṣe é sunmọ́." Lahila!
[But we again cried out: "We want a smiling leader! These ones are too stern!]

Clearly, the theme of disintegration can be read as a subtle subtext in Gbenga Adeboye's ethnic chauvinism. In the political commentaries, the Yorùbá are romanticised on the one hand, and on the other, he is surprised at the reality of the divisiveness that characterised ethnic politics even amongst Yorùbá politicians. Not surprisingly, he contributed in no small measure to the divisiveness when he narrated, for instance, the "achievements" of Lam Adesina, the erstwhile governor of Ọ̀yọ́ State in *Ayé Tótó*. This was done to negate the other Yorùbá politicians—and, of course, their Northern collaborators!—who attempted to undermine them. So much then for the romantic vision of the patriotic Yorùbá race that is much sinned against!

# Conclusion

To return to Walzer, a successful social critic can only hope to be effective only if she is an insider that rails against her society from within the conventional confine of that society. No Archimedean disinterestedness will guide her strictures to the heart of the matter than her own embeddedness in the social milieu. However, as we have seen with Gbenga Adeboye, being a subaltern social critic also comes with its own price. A social critic must not only be embedded to be effective, but they must also always operate with a deep suspicion of that social encumbrance that constantly threaten to swallow her in the rot of conventional corruption. Gbenga Adeboye was not that careful.

In the final analysis, it may become inevitable to conclude that Gbenga Adeboye was a veritable multi-talented social critic who gave a subaltern perspective on the calamity of governance in Nigeria. Yet, paradoxically, as a subaltern critic his social barometer only succeeds in giving us a parochial reading of the Nigerian condition that is far from enlightening. He ultimately failed to transform the subaltern position into an epistemic standpoint that drives a constructive alternative to the Nigerian predicament.

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# Comedy at the Junction of Popular and Political Cultures in Guinea: The Cases of Gèètö, Tyoptyop, and L'Homme

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This study examines the role that stand-up comedy has played in empowering popular culture, influencing political culture, and limiting the impact of censorship of artistic creativity in Guinea. It explores ways in which public humor, as a distinctive genre of expression, mitigates the effects of Guinea's low literacy rate while optimizing the informational, educational, and recreational potency of orature. It does this through a topical analysis of the works of three comedians who evolved outside the mainstream mass media and developed steady grassroots platforms and loyal audiences while exposing social injustice and moral flaws within their society. The study concludes that, paradoxically, the fact that the state denied them the status of bona fide artists enabled these comedians to remain free from political co-optation, scrutinize societal taboos, and expose the truth in ways that recognized artists could not under the prevailing political circumstances.

**Keywords:** Cultural policy; Gender relations; Humor; Oral literature; Political culture; Political censorship; Popular culture; Stand-up comedy.

## Introduction

This article explores major ways in which comedy exemplifies the power of popular culture to defy political censorship, advance freedom of expression, and contribute to the democratization of political culture in contemporary Africa. It uses the case studies of three popular comedians with distinctive performance styles and attempts to show how each style attracts audiences and how they promote free speech in the West African

country of Guinea-Conakry. The article does so from the combined perspectives of political history and social philosophy. The latter perspective refers to the comedians' conjuring up of Islamic and West African religious creeds to fustigate particular social flaws and moral deviancies that affect their society. In a broader context, the article posits stand-up comedy as an integral component of West Africa's enduring tradition of orature or oral literature, wherein masters of the spoken word provide captivating entertainment and engaging reflections on the issues of the day.

We identify the three comedians here by their stage names of Gèètö, Tyoptyop, and L'Homme, respectively. Gèètö performs in improvised neighborhood soirées because he has been denied access to state-controlled media for decades; Tyoptyop performs in established urban clubs; and L'Homme is essentially a street performer. Furthermore, the article addresses the economic aspect of the comedians' career. In doing so, it emphasizes the roles that 'parallel publicists' and 'container music merchants' play in disseminating the comedians' works in the absence of intellectual property rights protection.[1]

The article stems from the study of audiotapes and CDs obtained from Conakry 'container music merchants' and supplemented with the few relevant clips available on YouTube. It also incorporates inputs from Guineans familiar with the influence that these comedians have had on generations of their compatriots longing for engaging entertainment. The inputs were obtained over the past three decades through informal conversations and questionnaire-based interviews that were part of research on projects published subsequently in various formats. The author's personal and professional experience as a former Guinean journalist provided an understanding of the mechanisms that state media employed to censor the art in general. This background proved useful, especially when it came to putting the study in the proper context of Guinea's political and cultural history. The underlying objective of the study is to shed light on the historical evolution of freedom of comedic speech under the major political regimes that have ruled Guinea since independence in 1958: Sékou Touré's single-party regime (1958-1984), General Lansana Conté's military junta (1984-2008), and Alpha Condé's multiparty civilian regime (2010 to present).

In this article, we understand comedy as an art form in which performers utilize humor to entertain while conveying serious messages and, in doing so, brave societal taboos to reach and expose the truth. Moreover, we understand comedy once and at the same time as a universal and culture-centric genre of social expression. Accordingly, the central premise of the article is that the comedians studied here perfected their art by drawing content from the prevailing prepossessions of Guinean society while incorporating aspects of the universal potency of humor, as they exist in Guinean folklore. As such, these comedians represent a microcosm of Guinean popular culture, even though all three are from one of Guinea's many ethnic groups. To be sure, all of them are ethnic Fulani; that is, members of the country's largest ethnic group–40 percent of its 10.5 million inhabitants by the 2014 estimate of the Institut National de la Statistique (2014). These comedians stand also as an embodiment of their generations' quest for social change and freedom of expression in a society grappling with the vestiges of social inequalities and a state that has long practiced political censorship of the art. The place of these comedians' work in the interplay of popular culture and political culture in Guinea can be better appreciated when considered in conjunction with the evolutionary transformation of the Guinean state's official cultural policy and that of the national political culture in which the policy was couched. Hence, the article opens with a brief historical overview aimed at putting Guinean public humor in general, and stand-up comedy in particular, in the proper context. The overview is followed by a thematic study

[1] In this context the term 'parallel publicists' refers to individuals who contribute to the propagation of a performer's works outside the formal, mainstream media system. 'Container music merchants' are so called because they sell musical artifacts (videos, CDs, and DVDs) in shipment containers skillfully turned into secure kiosks placed along sidewalks and other such accessible places.

of the works of the three comedians with an emphasis on their respective discursive techniques and artistic styles through which they each confront eminently controversial issues in seamless and entertaining ways. Lastly, the article contrasts the proven ability of stand-up comedy to defy political censorship with the uncertain economics of it in contemporary Guinea.

# Guinean Public Humor in Historical Context

Contemporary Guinean society is the product of the amalgamation of several major ethnic groups and numerous smaller ones based on treaties that colonial France, Britain and Portugal, and the Republic of Liberia made in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries.[2] The major groups are the Fulani or Peuhl, Mandeka or Malinké, Soso, Kissi, Loma or Toma, and Kpele or Guerzé. The smaller ones include, but are not limited to, the Jallonka, Koniagui, Bassari, Badiaranke, Mano, Lele, Landouma, and Baga. Prior to European colonial occupation, the Fulani and Mande in particular, had established centralized state systems with discernible aristocratic classes, bureaucracies, standing armies and, most importantly for the present study, a class of professional storytellers and entertainers known as *jeli*, *jali* or *griots*.[3] The other ethnic groups were mostly organized into smaller political entities encompassing a few villages each.

Irrespective of their internal political organization and the size of their polities, these communities shared two characteristics that are particularly relevant to this study: they all developed compelling art forms that included comedy and storytelling; and they all had a worldview according to which it is undignified to satirize and mock the state ruler. Doing so is bound to undermine the ruler's power, and influence and weaken state authority. In a 1993 interview, Guinean dramaturge Wolibo Doukouré expounded the traditional worldview in these terms:

> In traditional West Africa, *griots* played roles akin to those of modern-day journalists, diplomats, advisors to rulers, storytellers, and archivists. As such, they had the power, the right, the duty, and the skills to speak truth to authority and hold it to account. They were the voice of the voiceless and ensured that rulers served the legitimate interests of the nation. The *jeliba* or master griots (who were closer to the rulers) could discharge this paramount duty safely and effectively because they maintained all along a high degree of decorum toward the dignity of the ruler and the authority of the state. In other words, rulers and *jeliba* operated under an unwritten contract of mutual trust and respect, which allowed them to serve the superior interests of the nation confidently and dutifully.[4]

Sékouba Bambino Diabaté, a musical star and a descendent of a respected *griot* family, corroborated Doukouré's analysis, adding that the Western idea of freedom of expression involving intrusive criticism of the private lives of public officials is alien to *griots*' concept of duty. Diabaté argued that one major reason why contemporary African states censor the media and the arts is that too many African journalists and artists behave in ways that cause governments to perceive them as adversaries. He was quick to clarify, though, that his view on the matter is not an endorsement of any sort of cult of personality that tends to portray political leaders as infallible. Between the two extremes, he insisted, "there must be a reasonable middle ground where leaders can be compelled to be accountable to the people without infringing the core African values."[5]

To the question of whether cult of personality was not exactly what *griots* created around traditional African rulers, Mamady Goblo Dioubaté responded with a thought-provoking explanation. According to this descendant of a *griot* lineage, when traditional

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[2] On the formation of French Guinea, see Rivière (1971); De Benoist (1979); Camara (2007).

[3] For more information on the role and status of the *griots* in West African history and cultures see Hale (1990); and Camara (2010).

[4] Wolibo Doukouré is a Guinean writer and dramaturge. He is the author of numerous writings on Guinean art during the Socialist Cultural Revolution (see Works Cited under Doukouré).

[5] Sékouba Bambino Diabaté is a Guinean *griot* and musician (see Works Cited under Diabaté).

*griots* chanted the praises of a king in public, they executed two intersecting tasks at once. On one hand, they accomplished an exclusive public-relations mission on behalf of the state (embodied in the king) by reassuring the king's subjects that they had every reason to trust and be loyal to their ruler, because he had their interests and well-being at heart. On the other hand, the *griots* held the ruler to account by reminding him that he owed his throne to the people because a leader without followers is a lonely wanderer. Dioubaté explained that this is the reason why *griots* generally couched their praises of a ruler in his genealogy. In doing so, they reminded the ruler that he was the heir to a family of dedicated servants of the people and the continuator of the family's noble deeds.[6]

Doukouré explained that we could better understand the evolution of cultural policy and political culture in Guinea by examining it with the preceding in mind. He further explained that considering this evolution would help bring to light the significance of comedy at the junction of popular and political cultures in Guinea, especially for readers who are not familiar with the country's cultural and political history. Doukouré was alluding to the fact that during the first decades of Guinea's independence (1958-1984), the ruling Democratic Party of Guinea (*Parti Démocratique de Guinée* – PDG) was the force that determined state cultural policy. So much so that Guinea's political culture conformed to the populist political program that the party articulated in a movement referred to as the Socialist Cultural Revolution (*Révolution Culturelle Socialiste* – RCS). Although the PDG only officially proclaimed the RCS in 1968, the beginnings of the movement go back to 1964 when President Sékou Touré announced the official adoption of a socialist path inspired by Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, and Castroism.

One of the main official objectives of the RCS, as stated in the charter that was proclaimed in August 1968, was the "rehabilitation and decolonization of African cultural values and artistic genius" in accordance with the political ideology of the PDG.[7] Consequently, artistic creativity was regimented to conform to the bottom-up structural organization of the PDG youth movement known as the Youth of the African Democratic Revolution (*Jeunesse de la Révolution Démocratique Africaine* – JRDA). Performers of all fields were to belong to JRDA artistic groups or musical bands and periodically compete in artistic festivals at the local, district, provincial, and national levels, respectively. Comedy was an integral part of JRDA artistic creation often enacted in the form of stage plays in strict accordance with party norms. The other national platform available to comedians was the national radio station officially called Voice of the Revolution (*Voix de la Révolution*) which broadcast weekly storytelling programs in Guinea's six major native languages. Cultural policy relegated independent or 'freelance comedians' like Gèètö, L'Homme and, to a limited extent, Tyoptyop to the rank of 'underground troubadours' and confined them to whatever platforms and audiences they could garner.

Paradoxically, the implicit ostracism (no written rules sanctioned the practice) gave these 'freelancers' more freedom of expression among grassroots audiences. To be sure, unlike JRDA artists and performers, they were under no obligation to serve as echo chambers for the single-party regime in relaying its political rhetoric. This is not to say that they had the freedom to disregard underlying party norms, if only because the party could plant informants in their audiences. After all, as popular culture had it, 'walls have ears, windows have eyes'. In fact, according to Thierno Dyaaka Souaré, a former host of cultural programs in the Fulani language for the *Voix de la Révolution*, the main reason why he never invited Gèètö on his programs was that Gèètö's stories and jokes we riddled with profanities. Souaré further explained that although the works of Gèètö and other 'underground troubadours' were not necessarily subversive toward the PDG, they

[6] Mamady Dioubaté AKA Goblo is a Guinean *griot* and art critique (see Works Cited under Dioubaté).
[7] For more information on this pronouncement, see Touré (1968, 1972, 1977, and 1982).

did not adhere to the core mission of the RCS. For that reason, he, an employee of the state radio station, was not at liberty to air Gèètö's comedy.[8]

At any rate, during the PDG era, the themes of the three comedians studied here intersected on different levels. The themes included the following: Islamic ethics; trust and moral self-worth/self-discipline; material wealth and power; love, marriage, fidelity, and infidelity; friendship and betrayal; family values; and gender relations. As a matter of general practice, they would embed political opinions and criticism in the comedic narrative centered on these themes. Gèètö and L'Homme skillfully incorporated riddles and proverbs, a method central to African oral literature. In general, all three used the proverbial iron fist in a velvet glove by resorting to social fiction by way of addressing real-life societal problems that they would not otherwise openly touch under the prevailing political circumstances.

Since the downfall of the PDG regime in 1984, the political environment has become progressively propitious to freedom of expression, including through the arts. During the reign of General Lansana Conté (1984-2008), particularly after the introduction of political pluralism in the early 1990s, the state relaxed its grip on the arts and, at a slower pace, on traditional mass media (the print media, radio, and television, in that order). As a result, competition intensified as a newer generation of performers emerged with a different stylistic trend. Unemployed college graduates formed independent networks of art promoters, just as established foreign comedians, such as Jean Miché Kankan (whose real name is Jean-Michel) of Cameroon, loomed large on the African arena. In this changing environment, veteran comedian Sow Baïlo Tyoptyop and newcomer Tonto Kendeka became national stars for a brief period from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. The constant competition for power and influence that the introduction of multiparty politics made possible and the multifaceted culture of intrigue that ensued provided much-needed material, and so did the birth of *Le Lynx*, a nationally acclaimed satirical weekly newspaper. With the preceding in mind, I focus in the next pages on some of the creative ways in which Gèètö, Tyoptyop, and L'Homme perfected techniques borrowed from West African popular culture to address issues in Guinea's political culture.

# Gèètö: Comedic Activism for Change

Gèètö is a tailor by trade and a comedian by vocation. He hails from Timbi Madina, an ancient town in the highlands of Futa Jallon, home to the deeply religious Fulani of central and northern Guinea. He does not have formal Western education but has gone through the traditional Koranic education that consists mainly of learning to read and write using the Arabic alphabet and memorizing the holy book of Islam. This aspect of Gèètö's background is significant because early on in his career as a comedian, he made the social inequality upon which the old Fulani order was based the prime target of his comedic activism. The goal, as he put it back in the late 1970s, was to compel his people to restore "the divinely ordained natural equality among the sons and daughters of Adam."[9] He thus framed his narrative at a dark period for the Fulani elite, a sizeable number of whom became political prisoners on suspicion of taking part in what the PDG leadership termed in 1976 the Fulani Plot against the Guinean Revolution.

[8] Thierno Dyaaka Souaré is a former political commentator and cultural program host for the Voice of the Revolution in Fulani (see Works Cited under Souaré).

[9] Excerpt from a live performance that Gèètö gave in Kenyen, Conakry, in April 1979 (see Works Cited under Gèètö, 1979).

# On Social Inequality and Injustice

Gèètö's philosophy of the divine right of all to equality is antithetical to the highly stratified socio-political system that his ancestors instituted in eighteenth-century Futa Jallon under the guise of spreading Allah's message and following His will. In effect, the quasi-theocratic polity that Fulani proselytizers created in the 1700s rested on the supremacy of a few clans of immigrant pastoralists and the subjugation of native agriculturalists.[10] The natives opposed the annexation of their land by the newcomers and resisted conversion to Islam, which they saw as an instrument of domination. Thus, by denouncing the regime of inequality created in the name of Allah, Gèètö confronts a key facet of his own upbringing, which is what enlightened disruptors have often done in history.

Upon defeating the fragmented communities of natives in their so-called jihad, the Fulani instituted a quasi-theocratic federation with nine provinces where Fulani self-proclaimed nobles subjected the natives to serfdom, alleging that Allah had willed His 'noble' servants to subjugate the infidels they converted. Gèètö confronts the injustice head on and underscores its absurdity by pointing out that the Prophet Muhammad and his warriors did not subjugate the Meccan idolaters upon defeating them. What they did, instead, was free the vanquished Meccans from idolatry by destroying the numerous tribal idols that they worshiped and compelling them to accept Allah as the only deity and Islam as their religion. The point here is that from the example of the Prophet, one learns that converting a populace to Islam does not give proselytizers the right to enslave the neophytes. Gèètö punctuates the story with utterances such as, "there is no bigger sinner than he who falsely accuses Allah of willing the subjugation of one people by another in His name" (Idem). He counters the old claim that 'noble' Fulani rightfully owned their serfs, saying: "the only way you could rightfully own your so-called serfs would be if you created one half of their being while Allah created the other half" (Ibid ). Lastly, he confronts corrupt Fulani clerics with the following question: "How can you claim to hold your neophytes' key to Heaven when you don't even understand that your blasphemous claims and misguided behaviors actually destine you to the eternal fires of Hell?" (Ibid) Gèètö backs his harsh objections and questions with selected Koranic verses that he recites with strong conviction, albeit with minor mispronunciations. A loose analogy to Gèètö's stance on this issue would be that of an American descendent of former slave owners citing the Bible to fustigate the long-abolished institution of slavery, but also racial discrimination against African Americans, which is very much alive.

# On Gender Inequality

Another sensitive issue that Gèètö tackles is gender inequality. He does this in an unconventional and quite provocative way by opposing male domination and female ruse in stories that require a deep understanding of Fulani culture and Guinean society to grasp. One such story is about the tangled web of a young couple undermined by greed and infidelity and terminated in due course thanks to the ruse of an older woman. In this story, the young husband is the only child of a wealthy man. He marries a young woman after rejecting several others without realizing that his bride is only interested in stealing two boxes of gold and diamonds that his late father left him. She plans the theft with the help of another young man whom she seduced into becoming her boyfriend for that sole purpose. In addition, she gets the unsolicited help of an elderly female neighbor who,

[10] On this see also William Derman (1973). *Serfs, Peasants, and Socialists: A Former Serf Village in the Republic of Guinea*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Boubacar Barry (1976). *Bokar Biro: le dernier grand almamy du Fouta Djallon.* Paris: ABC; and Maladho Diallo (2002). *Histoire du Fouta Djallon*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

unbeknown to her, is on a benevolent mission to protect the interests of the gullible young heir. The elderly woman convinces the young husband to take a short trip, come back earlier than promised, hide in a room adjacent to their conjugal bedroom and listen. Then she arranges a date for the young lovers. In the heat of the pillow talk that followed their lavish dinner, the woman reveals that she has stolen her husband's most precious inheritance (the gold and diamonds) and is now looking for a pretext to divorce him and get away with the fortune. She tries hard to convince the boyfriend to marry her once she has divorced. However, the elderly neighbor had warned him against going too far, so he rejects the offer and leaves in the middle of the night. The next day the husband confronts his adulterous and thieving wife, takes back his fortune and divorces her.

The lesson here is that the benevolent ruse of the elderly woman defeats the treacherous behavior of the greedy and unfaithful bride and saves the wealth and social standing of the betrayed husband, using the naïve romantic adventure of the boyfriend. The elderly woman does this for three reasons: first, because the young husband's late father had been her benefactor in times of need; second, because she sees it as her womanly duty to save the young bride from herself and her dishonorable behavior that is a disgrace to womanhood; and three, because she can. In this latter reason resides the most powerful message of Gèètö's social philosophy regarding the balance of power between the genders. That message draws from a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad according to which men are superior to women in 50 percent of life's scope and inferior to them in the other 50 percent. Hence, both genders need one another equally in order to fulfil 100 percent their human raison d'être. In this story, the underlying idea is that by enduring arbitrary gender inequality throughout most of human history women have developed survival mechanisms that are poised to manifest themselves in the form of something that men are quick to interpret as female innate treachery, especially when they feel threatened in their social manhood. Those survival mechanisms become more sophisticated as a woman matures. Their manifestations also become increasingly effective and puzzling to men stuck in their virtual universe of male superiority.

Gèètö's forceful evocation of the example of the Prophet Muhammad as the righteous path does not amount to some Salafist call for a blind return to seventh-century Islamic practices, however. On the contrary, Gèètö calls for progress and justice. He wants his Muslim society to modernize and advance with the rest of the world while remaining true to its authentic self, which includes ridding itself of the anachronistic mentality that brought about the baseless social injustices fustigated in the comedian's stories.

Interestingly, on both issues, social injustice in Fulani society and gender bias, Gèètö's social philosophy seems to converge with the political ideology of the PDG regime. In effect, the regime put much emphasis upon the abolishment of all forms of social inequality and social injustice, including the subjugation of women through polygamy, among other things. The PDG pursued, rather aggressively, a dual program of women's liberation and youth empowerment, which yielded tangible results in crucial areas such as academic education and professional training, equal opportunity in employment, and political participation. In a sense, then, the evidence contradicts the argument of Thierno Dyaaka Souaré cited earlier alleging that Gèètö's work did not adhere to the core mission of the RCS. The contradiction begs the question whether, in fact, the state media's ostracizing of Gèètö did not emanate from the Fulani establishment (his own people) who may have viewed him as a renegade activist out to sink their boat from within.

Mouctar Pilimini Diallo, a host of cultural programs for *Radio Rurale Labé* (Community Radio of the city of Labé) gave this question serious thought during our conversation on media, culture, and politics in Guinea. He cautioned researchers against rushing to judgment by making too much of the seeming convergence between Gèètö's

advocacy for social justice and the PDG political ideology. Diallo argued that to draw conclusions on Gèètö's stand on issues from his words alone is to miss the point of his narrative.[11] His argument recalls that of Karin Barber (1987: 1-78) who writes that in many African art forms "meaning cannot be extrapolated from the words alone but is conveyed by all the elements in combination." This is so, Barber explains, because these art forms "make their effects through a combination of music, dance, costume, mime, song, and speech." So, what value does music add to Gèètö's comedic activism?

# Music as Added Mystic to the Story

Diallo suggested that music adds enigma to Gèètö's story telling. He insisted that unless scholars consider this factor, they might not fully grasp the many subtleties of the comedian's masterful castigation of real-life flaws. In effect, on several of his available tapes, talented female singers accompany Gèètö, with instrumental support from the equally talented guitarist Jeli Sayon Kouyaté. The suave melody of Kouyaté's guitar provides a soothing background against which the singers render heartening lyrics that help put the stories in the proper historical and/or mythical and cultural context. A case in point would be the incorporation in Gèètö's criticism of Fulani quasi-theocracy discussed earlier of four legendary Mande songs: *Duga* or The Vulture, *Fama Dènkè* or Prince, *Alalake* or It is God's Will, and *Saya Manyi* or Death Is Terrible. Each of these iconic songs conveys a message of considerable moral and emotional profundity. Sung in this exact order in the background of the story summarized above, they give it new literary and philosophical dimensions. Consider these excerpts from two of these songs: *Duga* and *Fama Dènkè*.

**From Duga**[12]

Mawula, Mawula, Karadige!
No man speaks against the vulture
When the eagle is not on wing.
The beer drinkers behind the river
And bitterness never meet.
Ah Karadige!
The brave is a man of the moment
But where are the braves of yesteryear?
No matter how good a man may be,
Words will be said behind his back.
O Vulture of majestic flight!
Vulture of beautiful flight!
One bird, four wings.
O bird who floats in the skies
Yet can scratch the ground.
When the bird lands
He gouges a well
A well of God
Like a well in the Mande mountains.
Ah Mawula! The offering of white cola by evil
Is not new to the Vulture.
Who would speak against the Vulture?
Samanyana Basi spoke against him
And his head was cut off
And his great throat was cut open.

[11] Mouctar Pilimini Diallo was a former schoolmate of mine. He became a program host and, then, an administrator for *Radio Rurale Labé* (see Works Cited under Diallo). *Radio Rurale Labé* is part of a network of provincial radio stations that were established in the late 1980s in the regional capitals of Labé, Kankan, Kindia, and N'Zérékoré.
[12] On this version and more on *Duga* in general, also see Ministère de l'information du Mali, 1971, BM 30L 2505, and BM 30L 2506, and Bird 441-477.

Ah Bajubanen!
You might say a sacrificial bull of a Mande brave.
It is said that the poor man,
If he should speak of the affairs of kings
Will be given away as a gift by the king.

As one may suspect, the mythology behind the song *Duga* is a tragic one. It pertains to the tyrannical behavior of a Mande despot whose ruling style consisted of instilling fear into the populace through intimidation, violence, and manipulation. The authors of this epic followed a long-standing Mande tradition, which is to associate a ruler with a given animal whose overarching characteristics match, in the *griots*' imagination, those of the ruler in question. Thus, despite the occasional flatteries injected in *Duga*, the reference to the vulture as the central character is fully expressive of the disreputability of the ruler fictionalized in the song.

**From *Fama Dènkè***[13]

Don't weep, Prince
Weeping is not good.
Don't weep, Prince
You are the son of a lion
You are a Great Prince
Yours is not mere earthly greatness
It is from God
God blessed you with greatness.
Don't weep, son of a lion
Calm down, Great Prince.
Do not weep
Great Princes do not weep.
Please, calm down, Great Prince.

In contrast with the ruler associated with the vulture in *Duga*, the prince in *Fama Dènkè* is referred to as son of a lion for a reason: the lion is a symbol of gentle strength and protective power. In fact, the lion is perceived as such throughout Africa, and the perception is eloquently expressed in the saying, "The lion need not proclaim its lion-ness; it just needs to be itself." In the figurative context of *Fama Dènkè*, however, being the son of a lion is not enough to make one a lion, for it is incumbent upon a prince to earn the crown of his father in good time or else fall into disgrace and oblivion. Such was the case of Dyaulé Karamogho, a son of nineteenth-century West African ruler Samory Touré, to whom *Fama Dènkè* was originally dedicated. The background to the song is as follows: as part of the peace treaty that Samory Touré and the French reached in March 1886 in accordance with which the French recognized his authority under their protectorate, Samory sent Karamogho on a state visit to France. The ruler later suspected his son of conspiring with the French and had him sentenced to death in disgrace. *Fama Dènkè* is reportedly a homage to Karamogho, the son of a lion who never got to became one.

Mouctar Pilimini Diallo and Justin Morel Junior seemed to concur with one another that when analyzed together as one compact artistic performance, Gèètö's retroactive criticism of Fulani social stratification and the songs *Duga* and *Fama Dènkè* may reveal a veiled denunciation of the PDG dictatorship as well. Morel pointed out that other artists have modified the same songs into flattering hymns to President Sékou Touré in the height of the RCS.[14] In Gèètö's case, however, as Morel opined, one ought to contrast

[13] *Fame Denkè*, translated from a French version by the author.

[14] Justin Morel is a former cultural journalist at the Radio Television Network of Guinea whose director he later became. He is also a former administrator for UNICEF's Conakry bureau and a former minister of Information (see Works Cited under Morel). Although 'Junior' has become a de facto integral part of his name, it is a nickname that was given him when, as a high school student, he began broadcasting for the Voice of the Revolution in the 1970s.

the flattery of a Mande prince in *Fama Dènkè* with the ominous depiction of the 'Vulture King' in *Duga*. He further suggested that the contrast between the two musical narratives might well be applicable to the discrepancy between Sékou Touré's populist discourse and the oppressive nature of his regime. Incidentally, it is worth noting that Sékou Touré was a descendant of Samory Touré on his mother's side. Morel, a seasoned cultural journalist and a musical analyst, pointed at the chronological succession of the four songs in Gèètö's performance and suggested that the crescendo is a compelling subtle indictment of injustice. To be sure, the crescendo goes from the hymn to an honorable prince to the sarcastic laudation of a tyrannical king, and from there to the quasi-liturgical invocation of God's inescapable will and to the sad evocation of death as the unavoidable end to all lives, including those of the rich and powerful.

In the final analysis, as Diallo and Souaré averred, whatever may have caused the national media to ostracize Gèètö was ultimately irrelevant because the comedian developed a strong attachment to the freedom of expression that he and his audience had built outside the official sphere of mass media. With powerful discursive techniques available to him and with the existence of equally marginalized, though talented, musicians like Jeli Sayon Kouyaté and his singers, Gèètö could happily forgo the straitjacket of the Socialist Cultural Revolution. Diallo explained that he understood Gèètö's free spiritedness when, years after the fall of the PDG regime and the relative relaxing of political censorship, the comedian repeatedly declined invitations to perform on his program. As explained later in the article, the bond thus created between ostracized performers and their grassroots audiences represented a tacit breach into the citadel of state censorship, and Gèètö is one of its architects.

# Tyoptyop: Raising the Stakes without Breaking the Bank

Commonly known as Sow Baïlo, Tyoptyop's real name is Amadou Baïlo Sow. Incidentally, he is known to dislike the nickname Tyoptyop, even though he may have used it as an adolescent already doing comedy and music in his hometown of Labé. He is a college graduate with a degree in meteorology and works for the Guinean National Meteorological Agency. No wonder, then, his fans also refer to him as the 'intello' (slang for 'intellectual'). Tyoptyop's level of education does transpire in his comedy, particularly from the philosophical depth of his narrative contained in the prologues and epilogues to his stories. In fact, one would argue that from a literary standpoint, Tyoptyop is not as good a storyteller as Gèètö and L'Homme. His strength rather resides partly in the richness of those prologues and epilogues and partly in the hilariousness of his jokes. In addition, unlike Gèètö and L'Homme who use the Fulani language with Broken-French expressions here and there, Tyoptyop does most of his stand-up performances in French with a heavy Fulani accent. Sometimes he deliberately exaggerates the accent to make fun of specific characters in specific scenarios.

# On Human Nature and the Power of Upbringing

In the prologue to a story that he tells on the origins of Fulani cattle breeding and the ensuing social division of labor between pastoralist Fulani, cobblers, and *griots* Tyoptyop says that a human being is a fusion of a thing made and a thing created. By this, he means that humans make the body through procreation while God creates the soul and injects it into the body. This makes every human being an innate combination of natural and supernatural existence, an ever-evolving nexus of terrestrial and celestial force, wherein

the soul constitutes the source of life, consciousness, and moral values. Tyoptyop goes on to explain that the human soul is incapable of containing or conveying innate evilness because it is of divine origin: "nothing from God can be naturally evil," he emphatically affirms.[15] He further expounds the approach, arguing that because each human being is an ever-evolving nexus of terrestrial and celestial force, the social community in which the evolution of that nexus happens is fundamentally responsible for molding its earthly character. At the same time, though, evil exists on its own, independently from society's will, and lurks around us in attempts at penetrating our inner self every time we take a breath. Family upbringing, societal education and grooming, and personal maturity shield each soul from the relentless assaults of evil. Tyoptyop concludes his Rousseauean reasoning by challenging extreme individualism and invoking the well-known African adage according to which it takes a village to raise a child.

Fast-forwarding, we catch up with our 'intello' comedian in the epilogue to the story. There, he discusses another equally philosophical theme central to what Kenyan philosopher Henry Odera Oruka (1990) has termed African sage philosophy. That theme pertains to the age-experience-wisdom triad. Tyoptyop introduces the discussion with this riddle: "Have you ever wondered why young people are always in a hurry even though they have a whole life ahead of them, and why old people always take their time even though they have little time left?"[16] His theory is that the former are chasing time, which they will never catch, and the latter are dragging time knowing well that they will leave it behind, just as their progenitors did and just as their progeny will do. The former has little to no idea what they are after, the latter know too well the consequences of chasing time while under the spell of youth's innocent naivety.

The good thing about all this, as Tyoptyop infers, is that time is tolerant, generous, and nurturing: time begets age, age provides experience, age and experience together reward their holder with wisdom. He insists, nonetheless, that the reward of wisdom does not come automatically to individuals just because they are old and experienced. To these attributes, one must add a crucial asset: trustworthiness. Fulani speakers express the distinction as follows: the difference between a *mawdho* (a wise elder) and a *kiikalaadyo* (an old man) is *mokobaaku* (trustworthiness). The notions of trust and trustworthiness are paramount in traditional West African cultures. Hence, the dearth of it is widely believed to be at the heart of the region's long-standing socio-political crisis. According to this view, the prevalence of political corruption has created a heightened deficit of trust between the state and the ordinary citizenry in nearly every country in post-colonial West Africa. The deficit has resulted in widespread political instability and violence, including full-fledged civil wars in at least five of the region's fifteen nation-states, as the proponents of the view suggest.

# Joking Kinship or 'Sanakuyaagal' as a Form of Free Speech

Joking kinship is not a stand-alone theme in Tyoptyop's comedic narrative. It, nonetheless, plays a significant supporting role therein. It enables him to make powerful statements without appearing to be unduly judgmental. Thus, every now and then during a performance, he can be heard referring to questionable deeds as the works of '*Yettè Bariibhè*'; that is, people of the Barry lineage. The latter is one of the four constituent clans of the Fulani ethnic group of Futa Jallon, the others being the Sow, Diallo, and Bah or Baldé. Tyoptyop's reference to *Yettè Bariibhè* as the authors of questionable deeds excoriated in his narrative comes from a traditional West African social institution known

[15] An excerpt from a tape titled "Sow Baïlo au Palais du Peuple" (Sow Baïlo at the People's Palace). Conakry, c.1989 (see Works Cited under Sow, c.1989).
[16] Idem

in the region as *sanakuya, sanakuyaagal,* or *sanaweyaa* and to English-speaking researchers as 'joking kinships' or 'joking relationships'.

Historians, sociologists, and other social scientists have studied the institution from several perspectives. According to Camara, *sanakuya* rests on a pact that establishes a privileged relationship of solidarity among specific lineages through a system of friendly feud. The founders of the Mali Empire instituted the *sanakuya* system in conjunction with the Charter of Kurukanfuga created in 1236 to govern the nascent Empire following the victory of its first ruler, Sunjata Kéita. For example, in accordance with the alliances that stemmed from the Charter, the Camara are *sanaku* to the Sylla in the Soso ethnic group; the Diallo are *sanaku* to the Bah or Baldé, and the Sow to the Barry in the Fulani ethnic group. Camara further explains that in the Madenka ethnic group, where the phenomenon originated, the system is a bit more complex. Thus, "the Kéita are *sanaku* to the Bérété and Kouyaté, who are also *sanaku* to one another (thus forming a *sanakuya* triangle). In the same community, the Camara are once and at the same time *sanaku* to the Fulani lineages of Diallo, Diakité, Sidibé, and Sangaré of Wasolon who are also *sanaku* to one another (thus forming a *sanakuya* pentagon), as well as to the Kuruma, Fofana, and Sylla, who are also *sanaku* to one another (thus forming a separate *sanakuya* square)" (Camara 2010: 110-111).

Arguably, no other West African traditional social institution has empowered so many communities in such a complex web of mutual recognition and self-valuation, which, as Mark Davidheiser points out, includes the critical field of conflict resolution. Davidheiser writes, "Joking relationships are arguably the most effective institution used by mediators in that manner. Joking bonds are particularly intriguing because in some cases they were instrumental in the transformation of long-standing conflicts that had been resistant to prior intervention efforts" (Davidheiser 2016). Thus, being of the Sow lineage, Tyoptyop is perfectly justified under the *sanakuyaagal* pact to use the Barry as the figurative prism that refracts his insinuations on whoever the real target of his comedic criticism happens to be. The creative approach has proved its discursive effectiveness by allowing the performer to convey messages that could otherwise be controversial and sensitive while, at the same time, protecting him against unpredictable backlashes.

This latter factor is revealing because even though Guinean law and politics never officially criminalized comedy, comedians endured the wrath of the unofficial channels that were utilized to hinder freedom of expression in general. In fact, there is ample evidence that independent Guinean performers often feel the need to protect them from retaliation. Regrettably, self-protection can lead to self-censorship which, when pushed too far, becomes more detrimental to freedom of expression than state-sanctioned political censorship. On balance, it is safe to deduce that Tyoptyop's tactful use of one of his society's deeply rooted and widely shared values is a compelling technique of self-protection without self-censorship. Lastly, because joking kinship was designed to build bridges among diverse ethnic and geo-linguistic entities of various political leanings, and because it cuts across present-day Guinea's major ethnic groups (the Fulani, Mandenka, and Soso notably), it enables public humorists to acquire large and diverse audiences.

# L'Homme: Breaking Taboos through Humor

L'homme's comedic power resides, arguably, in his extraordinary ability to combine several discursive technics. One of those is condensing an entire social situation into a few verses consisting of a highly crafty rendering of proverbs and adages fitting for the social situation under consideration. Another is infusing those verses with dense moral lessons that leave the careful listener pondering the philosophical message contained in each verse. A third one is delivering the thus enriched verses in a hip-hop like rhythmic style that incites the audience to accompany the ending of each verse with an equally rhythmic and thunderous clapping. At times, the audience would chant verses with him

as if to put a stamp of consent on the narrative. This interactive style of street entertainment often attracts passers-by, prompting the growing crowd of spectators to form a circle that becomes the perimeter of the entertainer's stage, so to speak. Inside this circle, L'Homme moves back and forth and side to side at the rhythm of the spectators' claps accompanying his cadenced semi-poetic declamations. He punctuates the declamations, such as the samples shown below, with hilarious jokes generally received with loud laughter. Soon, excited audience members rival each other in throwing money on a tower or blanket strategically spread inside the circle for that purpose. These live donations constitute a major component of the comedian's earnings.

To appreciate the literary value of L'Homme's comedy in conjunction with Guinean popular culture, it is now fitting to examine his take on several key topics. I chose vanity and humility, the meaning of truth, and polygamy and the meaning of infidelity, because each of these topics brings to bear a pivotal component of that popular cultural.

***On Vanity and Humility (Manti è Munyal)***[17]

We bragged about electricity
And God sparked lightning
And we could brag no more!
We bragged about sugar
And God brought honey
And we could brag no more!
We bragged about air conditioning
And God unleashed a hurricane
And we could brag no more!
We bragged about life
And God brought death
And we could brag no more!

L'Homme snaps his fingers as he utters these verses, thereby creating a cadence that keeps the audience involved and entertained. The comedian marks the transition from one theme to another by acknowledging past and present benefactors in the following manner:

We give thanks to [name of the benefactor]
The proud husband/wife of [name of the spouse]
The blessed father/mother of [name or names of offspring]
A venerable resident of [city or town of residence].[18]

L'Homme's aversion for vanity and belief in humility expressed in the previous verses stem from a long-standing moral code by which ordinary Fulani families abide. Fulani scholar Thierno Mamadou Samba Mombéya (c.1765-1850) was known for being a strong advocate for humility, as this statement attributed to him attests: "I am sitting on my mound of knowledge and gazing at my mountain of ignorance."[19]

***On the Meaning of Truth (Ko Hondhun Woni Gonga)***[20]

Night and day make a truth.
Life and death make a truth.
Man and woman make a truth.
Health and illness make a truth.
Knowledge and ignorance make a truth.

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[17] On Vanity and Humility (*Manti è Munyal*), translated from Fulani by the author.
[18] Translated from Fulani by the author.
[19] For more information on the writings and thoughts of Thierno Mamadou Samba Mombéya see also Alfa Ibrahima Sow (see Works Cited under Sow, 1971).
[20] On the Meaning of Truth (*Ko Hondhun Woni Gonga),* translated from Fulani by the author.

High and low make a truth.
Big and small make a truth.
Hot and cold make a truth.
Right and left make a truth.
Front and back make a truth.
Young and old make a truth.
True and false make a truth.
Hard and soft make a truth.
Sweet and sour make a truth.

According to this dialectical deduction from the pairs of mutually complementary opposites, the concept of truth is once and at the same time absolute and relative. It is absolute insofar as the mutually complementary opposites are objective and are not liable to manipulation by human whim or consciousness. It is relative in that each opposite in each pair owes its objective validity to the relative nature of its very essence. For example, 'young' is always a relative measurement of existence within a particular segment of infinite time, and so is 'old'. 'Low' and 'high' are equally relative situational measurements within a particular segment of infinite space. Moreover, L'Homme's emphasis on '*a* truth' as opposed to '*the* truth' raises a critical ontological question. That is, is there a universal abstract truth (i.e., *the* truth) and if so, would it be the outcome of an interfusion of categories of factual truths? Otherwise, do individual categories of factual truths owe their trueness to the a priori validity of a universal abstract truth independent of factuality? Whatever the answer, it is doubtful that L'Homme would bother with such analytical abstractions of his matter-of-fact representation of the truth. What is certain is that from the standpoint of popular culture, he does contribute to the formulation of them, if for no other reason than because he offers a down-to-earth view on something as complex as the truth.

# On Polygamy and the Meaning of Infidelity

For anyone with some degree of familiarity with Guinean culture, a public challenge to the preconceived ideas about polygamy and marital infidelity from a Fulani man with a traditional upbringing is counterintuitive. Yet, that is exactly what we find in a story that L'Homme has told repeatedly, including in his native conservative town of Daara Labé. The story is a fictionalized trial of a young woman whose polygamous husband accuses her of committing adultery. In this story, a trial is held and the judge surprises everyone by siding with the woman's attorney who not only advises his client to admit defiantly to the extra-marital affair, but also urges the court to find her not guilty on the ground that she has been victimized by both her husband and the town at large. The attorney argues that it is utterly unfair to allow a man twice his wife's age to have her and three other wives and enjoy a pre-established number of romantic nights with each while the others are forced to await their turn like a piece of land awaiting the next rainy season to regrow its grass.

L'Homme chooses to somewhat simplify the scenario by making the judge an unmarried man. He does not tell us, however, what the verdict is, nor does he explain the aftermath of the trial, except to say that due to the judge's stand on polygamy, every eligible bachelorette in town wants him for a husband. On the other hand, the comedian's silence on the outcome of the trial is probably even more telling. For one thing, oral literature tends to leave much to the listener's imagination by being sketchy, sometimes on key aspects of a story. In this case, one is inclined to extrapolate that L'Homme's lack of elaboration on such key aspects seems to leave the listener at a four-way crossroads. In the crossroads, one way goes from the past that instituted polygamy toward a future without polygamy and one comes from the future to facilitate a painless decantation of the past. The third and fourth ways go from left to right and vice versa, with a flow of ideas, some innovative and revolutionary, some old-fashioned and

reactionary. Moreover, the silence seems to challenge the listener to give the story a second life, as it were, by imagining reasonable possibilities to fill the gap left by the narrator. At any rate, L'Homme's take on polygamy is as daring as Gèètö's take on the Fulani tradition of social inequality and Tyoptyop's on various problems that tend to undermine the accountability and legitimacy of the state in Guinea and elsewhere in West Africa.

# In Guinea, Stand-Up Comedy Does Not Pay the Bills

In a March 2014 conversation with blogger Fatoumata Keïta of Africaguinee.com, Tyoptyop lamented, "in Guinea art doesn't pay. Even though the country is renowned for its artistic resources, experienced artists do not get any support" (Keïta 2016). This statement is not entirely accurate, if only because a good number of Guinean artists have made a decent leaving as musicians or dancers, for example. It would be more accurate to apply the statement to comedy and not to the arts in general. The question then is this: Why is comedy not economically profitable in Guinea? I would argue that part of the answer goes back to the political regimentation of art during the PDG era discussed earlier.

Just like the media and academia, art flourishes where freedom of creativity and expression exists. Under the PDG and its *Révolution Culturelle Socialiste*, art served politics and ideology and, in the process, the independence and creativity of artists in general, and comedians in particular, were stifled. Performers of all sorts had only a small window of opportunity to utilize their talents in a gainful manner; for example, by performing at social ceremonies such as weddings and the like. Meanwhile, musicians and dancers who belonged to the national performance groups and musical bands qualified as government employees. The *Ballets Africains* and the *Ensemble Instrumental National* were among the top performance groups. National musical bands included *Bembéya Jazz National*, *Kélétigui et ses Tambourini*, *Balla et ses Balladins* and a few more. The PDG cultural policy did not recognize stand-up comedy proper as a bona fide art form, probably because comedians have the near-natural tendency to be free spirited and, therefore, harder to censor, once unleashed.

Under those circumstances, stand-up comedians often relied on networks of informal sponsors and benefactors on one level and 'parallel publicists' on another, to make money from their performances and supplement their livelihood anchored on actual professions such as tailoring for Gèètö and meteorology for Tyoptyop. As indicated earlier, L'Homme acknowledges his informal sponsors and benefactors during his performances every time he says:

> We give thanks to 'A'
> The proud husband/wife of 'X'
> The blessed father/mother of 'Y'
> A venerable resident of 'Z'

Gèèto acknowledges his in a similar manner. As well, while performing, both would have a towel or a blanket spread inside their circle of spectators as a donation depository. Ordinary spectators drop on that towel or blanket whatever amounts of money they can spare, keeping in mind that everyone is watching. Wealthy members of the audience hand the performer larger sums of money. Some even give, rather ostentatiously, fancy clothing or other such valuable material gifts. Only the performer and his inner circle know the amount of money and the actual value of material gifts obtained at any given performance. 'Parallel publicists' also play a noteworthy role in the expansion and maintenance of these comedians' fan clubs. One such category is that of taxi drivers,

especially long-distance drivers also known in some sources as 'bush taxi'. They contribute by playing the tapes of these comedians for their passengers, some of whom end up purchasing the tapes from people of another category referred to as 'container music merchants'.

As one can note, Guinean 'free-lance comedians' do not seem to operate in accordance with formal business models. This state of affairs, added to the fact that the earnings of street and neighborhood performers like the ones studied here are not subject to taxation, makes it impossible to assess with precision the degree to which stand-up comedy in Guinea is economically gainful on the micro level. On the macro level, however, the place of stand-up comedy in the cultural economy of humor in Guinea is more complex than financial profitability, or the lack thereof. We could best appreciate that place by understanding comedy for what it truly is, namely, an integral component of Guinean art and culture. For example, being a people-centered performer often earns a 'free-lance comedian' a status of grassroots celebrity, which carries tangible and intangible benefits alike.

For a while (late1980s to mid-1990s), the slow liberalization of artistic creativity in the post-PDG era aroused the hope to see the tide turn in favor of Guinea's talented comedians, along with other artists. At the same time, Guinean comedians found themselves pitted against more established competitors in West Africa and abroad. Even the few independent agencies that formed around the promotion of art in general paid limited attention to stand-up comedy and, therefore, did little to remedy its marginalization. In fact, not even the tragicomedy *La Face de l'Empire* (The Face of the Empire) released in 1985 made serious strides. Art and literature aimed at unveiling the true nature of Sékou Touré's regime, as *La Face de l'Empire* purported to do, seemed to appeal to the psyche of various categories of Guineans in the immediate aftermath of the fall of that regime. Nonetheless, the popularity of this theatrical production by Guineans returning from exile and disgruntled fellows at home did not last.

Lately, however, as the political instability that marked the latter decade of the Lansana Conté reign and the brief rule of Moussa Dadis Camara (December 2008-December 2009) receded with the election of Alpha Condé (2010), young entrepreneurs have been launching new artistic groups or revamping existing ones. *Nimitè Théâtre de Guinée* is one such group whose stated mission is to contribute to civic education and the promotion of Guinean culture through theatre. This group has represented Guinea to Senegal's International Festival in 2014, 2015, and 2016. Whether the new trend will sustain itself and to what extent it may uplift stand-up comedy remains to be seen. In the interim, the increasing availability of Guinean comedy on YouTube can be a blessing and a curse for comedians like the ones studied in this article. On one hand, it could progressively de-marginalize them by putting their works on the same global stage with those of 'mainstream artists'. On the other hand, the power of the World Wide Web could only amplify the detrimental consequences of the lack of intellectual property rights protection that their works have endured. It is a fact that Guinean artists have long suffered from piracy and bootlegging, both in Guinea and abroad.

# Conclusion

The fundamental aim of this article has been to explore ways in which stand-up comedy further enables popular culture to defy political censorship, advance freedom of expression, and contribute to the democratization of political culture in Guinea within the general context of contemporary Africa. The article has demonstrated that because of the somewhat peculiar nature of Guinea's political history and political culture, stand-up comedy *per se* has long been the domain of marginalized artists whereas their mainstream counterparts had to contend with stage-plays to accommodate state fiats and/or become competitive. Moreover, the article has shed light on an intriguing paradox that

characterizes Guinean stand-up comedy. That is, 'freelance comedians' or 'underground troubadours' enjoyed more freedom of creativity and expression than their mainstream counterparts did, especially during the first decades of Guinea's independence. Although cultural policy and political culture have changed since the introduction of political and media pluralism, along with the liberalization of artistic expression, this paradox is still detectable. Hence, 'freelance comedians' have been able to daringly challenge some of the most entrenched flaws of their society, as well as create their own fan clubs and networks of informal sponsors and benefactors. The three comedians studied here fully epitomize the pattern and, thus, can be safely characterized as mavericks of Guinean comedy. This is a crucial point because being a maverick is a state of mind, a choice, and a commitment to a cause that may not be popular. Sturges (2010: 279-293) says it best: "Comedy begins with personal reflections on the oddities and anomalies of life in which any individual indulges, but it takes on a broader, and even universal, significance when a writer, performer or visual artist structures that reflection into a comic form. Dismissing comedy as just a laughing matter misses this point."

By using humor openly to confront public issues and taboos buried in their societal heritage Gèètö, Tyoptyop, and L'Homme take Guineans' long-standing plight against political censorship and for the advancement of freedom of expression to a level that has generally been underappreciated. The comedians show a great deal of discursive competence by incorporating tools such as proverbs, riddles, and ricocheted criticism, which enables them to exercise free speech without opening themselves up to the wrath of state censors. On a higher level of appreciation, these comedians' ability to garner fan clubs through the different channels discussed here attests to the unique power of humor to inspire individuals of all age groups and socio-economic backgrounds to scrutinize their own historical and cultural heritage.

Lastly, the works of the 'freelance comedians' studied in this article are not the result of weeks and months of playwriting, script editing, and in-studio musical composition and arrangement that culminated in meticulous on-stage choreography. Instead, they are a compilation of stories created from everyday life experiences that the performers fictionalize in the typical ways of West African oral tradition and morphed into a bona fide corpus of oral literature. These unique attributes make the messages that transpire from the comedy of Gèètö, Tyoptyop, and L'Homme closer to the hearts, souls, and minds of ordinary folks who, because of the persistence of low literacy rate, seek and find in stand-up comedy uplifting entertainment and a source of inspiration.

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# Performing Humour on Ugandan Buses: Preliminary Insights on the Jokes Performed by Hawkers of Medicinal Products

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This paper examines some of the jokes that hawkers of medicinal products on Ugandan buses crack, with the aim of explaining what it is that the use of humour enables them to achieve as they ride on the buses to sell their wares. I also investigate the passengers' responses to these jokes and the key lessons that we can draw from them. In the third section of the paper, I identify and discuss a few instances when the jokes that hawkers perform fail to achieve their desired effect. Finally, I comment on the work that humour plays as a public health tool regarding the jokes I focus on in this paper. I closely read a few of the jokes performed on the buses and thereafter subject them to a textual analysis in two major areas: the literary devices used in the performance of the jokes, and the effectiveness of these devices in helping the performer (the hawker in this case) to attract the passengers' attention and create an amiable relationship with them as he/she markets his/her medicine.

**Keywords**: Humour, jokes, performance, hawker, medicinal product(s), bus(es).

## Introduction

In Uganda, public transport is organized around six kinds of vehicles: the 5-seater saloon car (usually used for special hire purposes), the 14-seater commuter passenger van which is sometimes called a *taxi* or minibus, the 28-seater commuter passenger van (usually called a *Coaster*), the bus (usually used for long-distance journeys), the *boda-boda* (a motorcycle taxi), and a bicycle (which is used in non-hilly parts of the country). In some of these vehicles, particularly the buses, the notion of entertainment is considered central to doing business; for this reason, they are fitted with DVD players and LCD screens. In the Kampala-Mbarara route buses, which I focus on in this paper, I discovered that almost every bus I used (between June and September 2016) showed several sketch

comedies by leading Ugandan artists like Herbert Mendo Segujja (stage name: Teacher Mpamire), Patrick Idringi (stage name: Salvado) and Anne Kansiime. But there are also live performances in the form of jokes made by hawkers of medicinal products who ride on the buses for part of the journey (usually the first or last 10 kilometres). It is these jokes that I analyse in this paper. I place special attention on the humorousness of the advertisements that hawkers use to sell their products, and not on the extent to which humour enhances sales. Put differently, I examine how humour is produced, and what its deployment in the marketing of medicine on the buses reveals about Uganda's healthcare system.

I am interested in the performance of jokes by hawkers on Ugandan buses for two interrelated reasons, both of which are highlighted by Ebenezer Obadare. The first one is that humour is one of the "means of navigating daily life in Africa" (Obadare, 2010, p. 98); for this reason, it is important that we examine how it works in particular contexts, in this case on public transport, one of the avenues where the hawkers of medicinal products try to eke out a living. The second reason is that "humour remains relatively under-investigated and is still far from seriously regarded" even when it serves many purposes on the continent, including being used to "'get even with', and 'resist' the power elite and the dominant power relations" (Obadare, 2009, p. 244). Sigmund Freud witnessed a similar paucity of studies on humour during his time, hence his observation, "jokes have not received nearly as much philosophical consideration as they deserve in view of the part they play in our mental life" (cited in Diack, 2012, p. 75). This is perhaps because humour is "a highly complex" phenomenon (Schnurr, 2010, p. 307) and "one of the most difficult subjects to study" (Apte, 1985, p. 13). Besides, it is "inherently ambiguous [in] nature" (Schnurr, 2010, p. 313). David Pier attributes the paucity of humour studies in Africa to "the need felt by Africanist scholars to focus on more 'serious' cultural topics in order to combat demeaning, primitivist prejudices about the continent", hence the tendency to "focus on the grander aspects of African cultures: their cosmologies, kingdoms, millennia-long cultural diffusions, and so on" (2019, p. 132).

This study is important in at least three ways. First, it calls attention to what Berger and Del Negro call "literatures on everyday life" which draw on "forms of expressivity that have been undervalued or neglected (cited in Otiono, 2011, p.385), that is to say, it valorises joke performance on Ugandan commuter buses as an example of a literary genre that Otiono calls "a seemingly simple and commonplace but peripheralized genre of every life" (2011, p. iii). Secondly, it raises pertinent issues that should be of interest to different government departments, one of which is the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Uganda. The fact that medicinal products can be sold in a bus by unqualified or self-proclaimed medical workers of dubious qualifications shows that in this country, mobile unlicensed and unregulated "pharmacies" proliferate. This is quite dangerous as I explain later in the paper. Finally, it highlights the ubiquitous nature of performance in the sense that the corridor of a bus can be transformed into a stage where literary work is enacted in front of passengers upon them being hailed into an audience. I suggest that this notion of a bus as a "stage" is in some sense a way of taking literature/theatre to the people. Looked at in this way, the humour performed on buses is comparable to the experimental travelling theatre of Makerere University in the 1940s to the 1960s. The idea of this project was to take drama to the people: students and staff performed plays in particular towns and villages, usually in open theatres (Cook, 2000; MacPherson, 2000; Kayanja 1967). The project was so successful that it led to the birth of similar projects in East Africa, for instance the Nairobi Free Traveling Theatre started, among others, by the late Ugandan playwright and poet, John Ruganda.

There is a similarity between this notion of a traveling theatre and the humour performed on buses, I argue, as both aim at reaching people who would not most likely go to a theatre. It is important to underline, then, that the use of the bus as a theatrical

space is a noble re-conceptualization of performance, particularly when we remember Ngũgĩ's contention that there is no such thing as an empty space since every performance space "is always the site of physical, social, and psychic forces in society" (1997, p. 13). In this study, I show how the bus's corridor is turned into a performance space where particular social themes are tackled and communicated to the passengers, who constitute both the audience and the clientele.

# Research Methodology

In this study, I chose an interpretivist paradigm since I sought to understand the viewpoints of the subjects I studied—the hawkers of medicinal products on Ugandan buses and the passengers whom the hawkers wooed to buy their wares. The choice of this paradigm was motivated by the fact that it enables a deep interest in the "participants' views of the situation being studied" (Cresswell, 2003 p. 8).

My approach to this study was qualitative because it "involves observation and interpretation of events" and takes on a "holistic perspective which preserves the complexities of human behaviour" (Black, p. 425). Such an approach was ideal since the aim of the study was not to generalise the findings to populations, but to glean an in-depth understanding of the ways in which the hawkers deploy humour as they do their work, and the benefits and challenges that come with this.

My research design was descriptive as I was interested in explaining different aspects of the dynamics of vending medicinal products on buses, for instance the kind of jokes the hawkers crack as they sell their wares, the different styles they employ to perform the jokes, the responses of the passengers to these jokes, and the implications of the jokes on the sales.

The route I chose for the study is the Kampala-Masaka road which Vokes calls "the busiest intercity highway in Uganda" (2019, p. 306). It has several bus lines, the most popular one being Global Bus which plies the Kampala Capital City-Mbarara City route, with a fleet of more than 86 buses (Shabomwe, 2020, n.p). This route is representative of the others regarding the practice of hawking medicinal products on buses, with humour serving as a marketing strategy. In fact, it is common to see a hawker work on more than one route, cracking the same jokes that he or she has performed elsewhere.

I used three major research collection methods—observation, individual interviews and close reading. I observed the hawkers as they advertised their medicinal products on the buses using the strategy of joke performance, and the passengers as they responded to the jokes. The objective was to understand the link between humour and marketing. I interviewed ten hawkers in order to understand why they crack particular jokes as they market their medicinal products. I also interviewed five bus conductors to identify the reasons as to why they allow or forbid hawkers on their buses. Finally, I interviewed ten passengers to appreciate their attitudes and reactions to the jokes performed by the hawkers. All these respondents were purposefully and conveniently selected in the sense that they had first-hand experience of the subject under study and were available to be interviewed, respectively. While the total number of respondents is low (just 25), I believe that this did not affect the quality of my findings since I was interested in "the depth of case-oriented analysis" that is fundamental to qualitative inquiry (Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, and Young, 2018, p. 2).

I also employed close reading as a data collection method. I read and re-read the jokes cracked by the hawkers in order to understand what they mean and the work they do in facilitating the marketing of medicinal products on buses. I do this with the context within which the business transactions between the hawkers and the passengers take place, since there is a direct link between subject matter and context. In any case, "humor is often context-specific" (Vuorela, 2005, p. 119). I pay careful attention to the actions of both the hawkers and the passengers, for instance the verbal exchanges between them as

I examine the role that the jokes play in the marketing of medicinal products. Furthermore, I closely read secondary sources—both print and electronic—on humour, performance, and itinerant vending of goods in order to enrich my interpretation of the primary texts I am working with, that is to say, the jokes as performed by the hawkers.

Data analysis involved "not only understanding the surface meaning of the sentences [carrying the jokes, in this case], but comprehending the deep underlying meanings within and connections among them" (Kusch, 2016, p. 30). This required me to identify the meanings of the jokes that the hawkers performed and to examine the different ways in which the passengers responded to them, either with laughter or disdain, as well as explaining the reasons behind these disparate reactions.

The research was conducted in an ethical way as guided by particular considerations. I received consent from the hawkers, conductors, and passengers for interviews, upon explaining the purpose of the research. I respected the decision of those people who did not want to be interviewed. For those who accepted to be interviewed, I ensured that no individual-identifying information was used as I kept all the responses anonymous. I also secured their permission to call them on their cell phones for follow up questions should the need for further probing arise.

# Understanding Uganda's Health Context

The modern health sector in Uganda is composed of four types of facilities: hospitals and health centers graded as level 4, level 3, and level 2, which can be government, private for-profit, or private-not-for-profit operated and owned (Katusiimeh, 2005, p. 91). The country's health infrastructure, according to Health ministry estimates, "consists of 6,937 health facilities of which 3,133 (45.16 per cent) are government-owned, 2,976 (42 per cent) are private for profit, with majority of them being in Kampala and the central region—and the rest are private not-for profit" (Musisi, Ashaba, and Kitunzi, 2021, n.p). "With low ratios of physicians to population (0.1/1,000 people) and hospital beds (0.5/1,000)," writes David Bell et al., "Uganda has a relatively fragile health system with limited capacity to expand critical care services" (2020, p. 1192). This fragility is characterised by serious challenges like

> unlicensed facilities, poor waste management, poor infection prevention and control practices, inadequate PPEs, poor prescription practices, poor record keeping, inadequate qualified staff or the services offered, and poor laboratories often providing inaccurate results, which all affect patients and caretakers in one way or the other. (Musisi, Ashaba, and Kitunzi, 2021, n.p).

In 1994, the Government introduced user fees. This was at the instigation of the World Bank which pushed for what it called market reforms based on four cardinal market principles:

> Individuals, charities, and private organisations should be made responsible for health care; Public funding of health care should be restricted to health promotion and prevention of disease; the Central government's role should be restricted to policy formulation and technical guidance, with delivery of services left to the private sector and local authorities; and the private sector and non-governmental organisations should be supported to become the key providers of health and social services. (Okuonzi, 2004, p. 1173)

This model led to poor people being unable to afford quality medical care, thereby leading to "a dramatic drop in take-up of health services" (Okuonzi Okuonzi, 2004, p. 1173). This has been compounded by several challenges like political interference in the hiring of people to senior positions in the ministry of health which has seen "inexperienced junior officers appointed to the influential positions of Minister, Permanent Secretary and Director General of Health Services" (Mbonye, 2018, p.120).

Besides, there are high levels of abuse of office through the stealing of public funds meant to improve the quality of healthcare—what Everd Maniple calls "deliberate wrongdoing which has become a norm" (2011, p.vi). This vice is hard to fight because of "the dictatorial nature of the government in power, [which] by restricting political freedoms, makes accountability for delivery of health service almost non-existent" (Katusiimeh, 2005, p. 102).

When the Covid-19 pandemic struck the country in March 2020, it

> exposed the fragilities of the country's public health system long ignored by policy makers who routinely seek treatment at private hospitals or travel out of the country for treatment at first world hospitals where billions of shillings of taxpayer funds are spent annually to secure their treatment. Hospitals were stretched to the limits, compelling some to limit treatment to only Covid-19 patients barring others with diseases such as malaria, cancer, tuberculosis and heart diseases. (Musisi, Ashaba, and Kitunzi, 2021, n.p)

This situation is exacerbated by "weak state capacity in ensuring that laws be implemented and health services be regulated to ensure effectiveness across the board (Katusiimeh, 2005, p. 91). This partly explains why there are hawkers of medicinal products in the country even when there are national bodies like the National Medical Stores whose mandate is to procure, store and distribute essential medicines and medical supplies to health facilities in Uganda[1] and the Uganda National Bureau of Standards whose mandate is to develop and promote standardisation, quality assurance, laboratory testing, and metrology to enhance the competitiveness of local industry, to strengthen Uganda's economy and promote quality, safety and fair trade.[2] As a matter of fact, the informal supply of medicinal products to the population is a common practice in Uganda. In a research on children's perspectives on common diseases and medicines used in Ugandan Primary schools, the children revealed that the medicines they used came from multiple sources, including "friends in the dormitories, clinics, school canteen, pharmacy nurse, and home", with a special focus, among the boys, on "the importance of a fellow pupil called 'the herbal man' who was a vital source of medication to ill boys in the Dormitory" (Akello, Ovuga and Rwabukwali, 2007, p.77). In the next section, I focus on how the hawkers of medicinal products take advantage of the dire health situation to provide informal medical services to the public in the form of supplying medicines, using humour as a marketing strategy.

# Selling Medicinal Products Through Humour: Reading Selected Jokes Performed by the Hawkers

To attract attention to their merchandise, the hawkers employ humour which, as Vuorela observes, "comes in many forms—narrative jokes, nonsensical slapstick, irony, and sarcasm, to name but a few" (2005, p. 106). Through humor, "we identify ourselves with a particular people who share a set of customs and characteristics" (Vuorela, 2005, p. 120) and a set of needs. In the context of this study, the shared characteristic could be the precarious health infrastructure in the country while the shared set of needs could be the quest for medical supplies to heal troublesome ailments. Vuorela suggests that it is useful for business negotiators, in our case the hawkers, "to be aware of the possibilities of using humor strategically in business negotiating" (2005, p. 127). To be able to do this, the hawkers need to know how to engage their potential clients, the passengers on the

[1] See https://www.nms.go.ug/index.php/about-nms accessed September 11, 2021.
[2] See https://www.mtic.go.ug/uganda-national-bureau-of-standards/#:~:text=Mandate%3A%20The%20UNBS%20mandate%20is,quality%2C%20safety%20and%20fair%20trade accessed September 11, 2021.

bus, since the act of performance (cracking a joke, for instance) is a form of situated behaviour "rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts" (Bauman, 1975, p. 298), which include "setting, act sequence, and ground rules of performance," with the last item owing to the fact that "[a]s a kind of speaking, performance will be subject to a range of community ground rules that regulate speaking in general, but there will also be a set of ground rules specific to performance itself" (1975, p. 299).

From my experience, the rules in the bus relate to civility and sociality. The hawker is expected to greet the passengers as politely as he or she can, congratulate them on whatever they have been up to (for instance successfully attending work-related meetings and visiting relatives), and ask them for permission to speak. The hawker will increase his or her chances of winning the good will of the passengers by wishing them a safe journey to their destinations. Sometimes he or she will say a prayer for them, usually in the fashion of Pentecostal spirituality characterised by a focus on victorious living and economic and financial prosperity, which as David Maxwell observes, is a way of offering "hope to those suffering from a sense of personal abjection created by the shattered hopes of independence and the elusive promise of modernity" (2005, p. 4). This is similar to what Yusuff reports in Nigeria where one of the key strategies that itinerant vendors use to win acceptability among the passengers in buses is to say "prayers against death of the passengers from road traffic accidents, and against contracting diseases of the physical and / or meta-physical origins (2011, p. 131).

There are a number of stock jokes that the hawkers of medicines crack on the buses. One of these features children who have not been dewormed in a long time, so much that their bellies get distended. Because these children do not know what is happening to them, they start bragging that they have become *mafuta mingi* (Kiswahili for "lots of fat"), a literal reference to affluence and good living. This notion of a *mafuta mingi* comes from the presidency of General Idi Amin (1971-1979) and refers to members of the military and political class who suddenly found themselves rich when Amin expelled much of the Asian community from Uganda and distributed their (the Asians') properties to them (Wakoko and Lobao, 1996). The beneficiaries of this Economic War (as Amin referred to the expulsion) developed bulging chins and bellies, thereby earning themselves this nickname.

This joke usually sends passengers laughing because of the irony it is built around: a worrying medical condition is mistaken for something nice to boast about. The audience wonders at the ignorance of these children who are unable to realize that they are patients who require urgent medical attention, not rich people whose bellies have bulged out due to affluent living. The parents of these children are also indirectly ridiculed for neglecting their primary responsibility of ensuring that their offspring are healthy. But the joke also tells us of the poor state of the health sector in Uganda. If the country had a good health system, there would certainly be no children with distended bellies, and neither would the bus be the place where people buy their medicinal products, moreover without any diagnosis or prescription. The joke is therefore a reminder that Uganda's health sector is in shambles characterized as it is by what Knudsen politely calls "limited choices" (2003 p. 253).

A similar joke told by the hawkers of medicinal products is about a child who suffers from a fungal infection that creates growths in the hair which look like legal tender in the form of a steel or copper coin, hence the Luganda name for this condition, *ebisente* (money). Conflating these growths to actual money, the child's playmates congratulate him/her upon getting rich. This joke is told by the hawkers when they are advertising a cream that purportedly cures the fungal infection in question. Like in the first joke, its humor lies in the irony surrounding the boast, for the listener is aware that the coin-like growths that the infection creates are something to worry about, and not to be proud of. But the hawker also employs satire, which Abrams and Harpham define as "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and

evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn of indignation" (2012 p. 353). The children are being ridiculed as being naive or foolish for rather than get worried about their condition, they take it as something to be proud of. Their parents are also ridiculed for being quite irresponsible as they look on as their children's medical condition remains unattended to.

The above jokes were successful in the sense that they sent most of the passengers in the bus laughing. One of the reasons that explain this success is that the context in which the jokes are performed is understood by the passengers: They know the origin of the term *mafuta mingi* and therefore the connotations it carries, and they also know the fungal infection the hawkers are talking about. They are therefore able to get the joke, since their knowledge of the context makes them "capable of analyzing the cognitive frames presented by the actor" (Beeman, 1999 p. 103).

Besides, the jokes made it possible for the hawkers to catch the attention of the passengers, since this is one of the uses of humour in advertising (Weinberger and Gulas, 1992). Núñez-Barriopedro, Klusek and Tobar-Pesántez make the same observation when they state that humour is one of the tools that advertisers use "in an attempt to improve statistics, attract more consumers as well as capture the customer's attention, their attitude towards the advertisement, and above all, their attitude towards the brand" (2019, p. 1). This is important given the fact that often, passengers, just like municipal governments, consider hawkers a nuisance (Fadaee and Schindler, 2017, p. 61). Cracking jokes is one way through which the hawkers try to mitigate the passengers' animosity towards them, with the hope that they will accept them on the bus. In other words, comedy is one tactic they employ to win acceptability among the passengers. It is—literally speaking—the hawker's ticket to enter the bus and ride on it. One passenger had this to say on this matter:

> Humour grabs the passengers' attention. Some people end up engaging the sellers of medicinal products in discussions or questions. Because of the use of humour, people end up being provoked to take interest in the product. I sometimes get tempted to look at their products. I have noticed that some passengers will give the hawker some money because of his or her comedic performance, even when they have bought nothing. A boring hawker will speak to himself or herself without any passenger bothering to look at him or her; a humorous one has more chances of being listened to and of being engaged in the form of questions.

A different respondent had more or less a similar view:

> Every type of business requires a set of tactics to use to market a product to a people. When you have a sense of humour, you talk to people easily, and connect with them. These hawkers go to the people to sell their products; they need to talk with some humour in order to connect with them. Some people might not buy what you are selling, but because of the joke you cracked, they could buy from you in future. Humour enables the seller to make friends on the bus, and this could be useful in future. A humorous hawker can even receive referrals: someone might tell a friend about his or her jokes and about the medicinal products he or she is selling, which could come with business.

In other words, humour makes the hawkers acceptable to the passengers, to the extent that even those who have no intentions of buying any product keep hooked to the performer, or even pay him or her a tip, because of the jokes he or she is performing. The act of cracking jokes therefore becomes an aesthetic in its own right, with the passengers (or at least some of them) becoming an ardent audience that recognizes the hawkers as artists, since their act of joking "calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of expression, and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity" (Bauman, 1975, p. 293). It is no wonder, then, that many researchers have suggested that humour is important in initiating, "developing, negotiating, and maintaining essential interpersonal relationships"

(Serafini and Coles, 2015, p. 637), since it breaks the ice, so to speak, and bridges the gap between human beings. It could also allow humans to "become more tolerant and sympathetic of others, and live a more enjoyable life" (Serafini and Coles, 2015, p. 638), in the sense that something precious (a good joke) comes out of the encounter between the hawker and the passengers, even if nobody buys the medicinal products that the hawkers are advertising or marketing.

One respondent explained how humorous advertising can drive up sales:

> The jokes are entertaining, so they relax the people as they travel to their destinations. This makes the journey shorter, in some way, since the joke-performers break the monotony of the bus droning on and on, without any other activity taking place. But the jokes also invoke curiosity, as the passengers may inquire from the hawker if it is true that the medicinal product that he or she is selling heals the diseases that he or she claims they do. This inquisitiveness can drive up the sales. Sometimes there are those people who will buy the product not because they believe that it is as good as the seller claims it to be, but because they are compassionate. Since the seller has cracked many jokes that have made them laugh, the passengers end up buying the product for the sake of the performance, so to speak, and not necessarily because it is a good product. The jokes, as a form of knowledge, can provoke some passengers to carry out research on the efficacy of the medicinal products being advertised.

The above idea—that some passengers may buy the product not because it is medically efficacious but because it has been advertised humorously—is insightful, as it highlights the power of art in the marketing of products. It points to the economic value of humour: The more successful at comedy the hawker is, the more he or she will likely sell his or her products. This is not surprising as comedy has become an important industry in the country. Indeed, the last decade has seen significant increase in stand-up comedy enactments in Uganda, with different shows around the country and especially a weekly event hosted by Alex Muhangi at the Uganda National Cultural Centre in Kampala called the Comedy Store Uganda, which is aired on NTV Uganda every Tuesday. In fact, Uganda boasts of an array of renowned comedians; for instance, Anne Kansiime (who is known across the continent for her social media comedic skits), Akite Agnes, Salvado, MC Mariachi, and Teacher Mpamire, among others, perform jokes to the delight of myriad audiences.

However, this notion of people buying medicinal products because of the jokes the hawkers perform, and not because of what they consider its efficacy, raises a serious issue: humour can mislead. It is to this point that I now turn.

# When Humour Misleads: On the Limits of the Jokes that the Hawkers Crack

There are times when the jokes cracked by the hawkers fail. To Bell, failed humour refers to "any utterance that is intended to amuse, but that, for any reason, is unsuccessful in doing so" (2017, p. 356). For Vine, Kell, Marra and Holmes, "[h]umor is considered to have failed if no-one indicates that they have found it funny, even if the person making the joke intended to be amusing." (2009, p. 127). In the study, one of the jokes that failed was about a woman whose feet are said to have cone-like growths that tear bedsheets and blankets at night, making her husband buy new beddings every month. Such women, the hawker said, need to buy one of the products he had in store—a certain medicinal cream—so that they restore the smoothness of their feet. This way, they will save their husbands the discomfort of sharing beds with someone with damaged feet and the expense of buying new blankets every month.

One furious female passenger demanded to know from the hawker if the problem of cone-like feet was limited to women, and if all blankets in homes were bought by men.

Before long, most female passengers were calling upon the bus conductor to eject the hawker from the bus for disrespecting women. When I asked the furious female passenger why the advert had offended her so much, this is what she said:

> Many of the jokes these people crack are stale, and not worth a penny. Look at this one he has been cracking. It is stereotypical and disrespectful to women. It presents the woman in morbid terms: There is something sick about her feet. Yet I have seen more men than women with feet like the ones he describes in the joke. If you do not challenge this, he will go on investing in stereotypes and embarrassing women every time he has an opportunity to. Besides, he mistakenly thinks that all beddings in homes are bought by men. The world has since moved on, and many women have become capable heads of families and households. By imagining the woman to be depending on her husband, the hawker errs, and he has to be brought to order lest he continue spreading misogyny everywhere he goes.

This response is similar to the irritation some passengers expressed at an advert of a remedy for Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs). The hawker exaggerated the way the female sufferers of UTIs scratch themselves in their private parts owing to the itching and discomfort caused by the infection. Some passengers, particularly the males, found the dramatization humorous, owing to the exaggeration and paralinguistic resources like facial expressions and gestures that the hawker used, but to some women, the advert was offensive because it was given in bad faith (since UTIs are not a laughing matter), besides it being sexist (targeting women). This response by the women brings to mind Cooper and Dickinson's observation that the deployment of humour comes with "the risk of reducing the importance of the message or of the interaction veering into mocking" (2013 p. 230) and that "humour can alienate and push people away from the discussion if [it] is viewed as being out of place, inappropriate or unnecessary" (p. 232). It is significant that the female passenger called the male hawker out since "[s]exist humor may be more difficult to confront than serious expressions of sexism because humor disguises the biased nature of the remark" (Mallett, Ford and Woodzicka, 2016 p. 272).

The responses further make it clear that performing jokes on a bus is not an easy task, particularly when the hawker does not ensure that he or she is politically correct as far as certain ideologies (in this case feminism) are concerned. It might be true that "[h]umor gives broad license to the humorist, allowing statements that, if delivered in a serious manner, would not be tolerated" as Gulas, McKeage and Weinberger (2010 p. 116) argue, but there are situations where the audience takes exception to this broad license and actually goes ahead to censure the humorist. By doing this, the audience ensures that its silence on the issues it finds problematic is not mistaken for supporting the viewpoint given in the joke since "[b]y laughing at or ignoring a humorous attack, the target tacitly supports or accepts it" (p. 116).

Sometimes, the issue at hand is not offense, but outright misinformation. This usually happens when the hawkers deploy humour to exaggerate the efficacy of a particular medicinal product that they are selling. One such instance concerns the *mondia whytei* root (Luganda name: omulondo) which is said to cure erectile dysfunctions in men and is "popularly linked to the management of impotence problems" (Agea et al., 2008 p. 400) and "chewed as a sexual stimulant" (Agea et al., 2008 p. 402). The hawkers give it praise names in exaggerated, but humorous ways, that usually make the passengers in the bus laugh. These names include: the helper of sad bedrooms, the roar of the bedroom, the miracle cure, the waker of sleeping lions, and the bringer of children in sets of two or three. While Agea et al. find that majority of the consumers (94%) believed that the medicinal "root has an aphrodisiac effect" (2008, p. 402), it is possible that this belief is a result of the literary art used to market it, in this case the use of nomenclature. This implies that it is possible for humorous advertising to lead to what Shabbir and Thwaites call "deceptive advertising" which Aditya conceptualizes as being "any act, claim, or message that (a) causes at least some consumers acting reasonably to make decisions that they would not otherwise make; (b) leads at least some consumers acting reasonably to

believe something about the product, brand, or manufacturer that is not verifiably true; or (c) has the potential to foster distrust of any kind, general or specific, or in other ways cause an erosion of ethical values deemed desirable in society" (cited in Shabbir and Thwaites 2007, p. 76). Shabbir and Thwaites explain how the use of humour can be dangerous as far as spreading misinformation is concerned:

> The framing of humor with deceptive claims allows an association between the two such that if consumers do consciously process the deceptive claim, they are more likely to prime this potential deceptiveness with the humor. Therefore, even if the consumer did acknowledge the deceptive claims, he or she would be less critical, given the "feeling of well-being" generated by the humorous content of the ad. Humor serves to mediate the severity of the deceptive claims by concealing it through masking. (Shabbir and Thwaites 2007, p. 82).

The point I am making is that humour is a double-sided sword that is potentially dangerous, as the liveliness that it makes possible can also mask the false nature of some of the claims that the hawkers make regarding the efficacy of the medicinal products they are selling. It is no wonder that in one of Uganda's languages, Luganda, a theatrical performance like the one that hawkers are involved in (cracking jokes) is referred to as *katemba*, a word that means, among others, "foolery" and "illusion," with "implications of aspects of entertainment, impersonation and role-play" (Kasule, 1998 p.42). If we look at the hawker of medicinal plants from a performative perspective as I am doing in this study, he or she is a harmless entertainer who makes passengers laugh as he or she makes fun of those people who needlessly suffer from diseases for which there is a cure. But if we look at him or her from a pharmacological perspective, the hawker of medicinal products is quite dangerous, since there is no proof that the wares he is selling are safe to use, or as efficacious as he or she claims them to be. For this reason, the words that Kasule identifies with the theatrical performer or performance (foolery, illusion, and impersonation) take on new meanings as they become a warning to the passenger in the bus that the "miracle" healing powers bestowed on the products on sale may be illusory since the hawker is impersonating the formally trained pharmacist.

One of the respondents made a similar point when he commented thus:

> Some comedies are propaganda-based; for this reason, some hawkers make false claims: that their medicinal products heal every disease. If a medicinal product is said to heal every disease, it is possible that it does not heal any. It is one thing to be a humorous seller of medicinal products; it is quite another to have genuine products that heal the diseases you claim them to. I have bought several products that were supposed to help me get rid of many ailments, but this has not happened; the ailments have remained with me. It is one thing to market a product with humour; it is another for that product to be a good one.

Finally, there are issues of dosage and expiry date to worry about as well as the fact that "nobody is aware of the procedures engaged by the producers" of the medicinal products on sale, be they herbal or otherwise (Azila-Gbettor, Atatsi and Adigbo, 2014, p. 41). However humorous the hawker of medicinal products may be, this does not take away the fact that most of their products do not have specifications of dosage and expiry dates, both of which have a bearing on efficacy.

# Humour as a Public Health Tool: What the Jokes the Hawkers Crack Reveal about Uganda's Health Sector

All over the world, the arts are employed successfully "as a way to engage community populations in improving wellbeing, health literacy, and access to healthcare services"

(Sonke and Lee, 2016, p. 109). In Africa, "the arts have been used in health practices since at least the pre-colonial era," with Uganda having "a unique history among nations in using the arts in biomedical settings" (Kasule, Kakinka and Sonke, 2016, p. 123). Some of the arts that have been used to communicate health messages to the Ugandan population include orature (Kahyana, 2013), music, dance, and drama (Kasule, Kakinka and Sonke, 2016), theatre (Sicherman, 1999), and sculpture (Nabulime, 2011). While this study is not primarily about the arts as a medium of health communication, it examines how hawkers of medicinal products use humour, an art form, to market their products to the passengers on public buses.

Michael Mulkay observes that "[h]umour is of interest, not only in its own right, but also because its study helps us better understand our serious social world" (cited in Simpson and Snow 2017, p. 78). This means that if we look at the jokes that the hawkers tell, we can get a fair understanding of some of the key issues that relate to Uganda's health sector. For this reason, Cooper and Dickinson's observation that humour "keeps conversations moving; and acts as a gateway to discussion of taboo, personal and private subjects that lie at the core of effective peer education" (2013, p. 229) is helpful here.

Indeed, from the jokes examined so far, there are a number of issues that arise about Uganda's health sector. One of them is the easy access to medication. The fact that someone can buy medicinal products from a pharmacy or herbal clinic and vend it anywhere he or she finds potential buyers, be it a street or a bus, is a little disconcerting. The mechanisms in place to regulate the operation of the pharmaceutical sector are weak. One of the unfortunate implications of this is that "Uganda is one of the countries where prescription-only drugs, including antibiotics, can be obtained over the counter" (Mukonzo et al., 2013, p. 303). This is an area that both the Government of Uganda and the Pharmaceutical Society of Uganda need to work on to ensure that sensitive medicinal products are not sold in a *laissez-faire* fashion. This is not to suggest that the vending of medicinal products should be banned; rather, I propose that there should be categories of medicines that the hawkers can sell without the requirement of a prescription, and those that should only be accessed at a pharmacy upon presentation of a prescription from a medical professional, say a physician. Besides, there is a need for some minimum qualifications that vendors need to have (say some basic training in medicine or pharmacology) and some minimum standard operating procedures they should follow when they are selling medicinal products.

The second issue is the possibility of fake or low-quality medicines being sold to unsuspecting citizens. If the selling of medicinal products is not regulated by the government and professional bodies, then the quality of the products cannot be guaranteed. We have seen this problem during the Covid-19 pandemic, when 800 people were injected with a fake vaccine that turned out to be water (Tumusiime, 2021, n.p). Azila-Gbettor, Atatsi and Adigbo report a similar scenario in Ghana, where patients are exposed to medicines that "have not undergone clinical tests to authenticate their safety [and] efficacy" (2014, p. 41).

Related to this is the cost of the medicinal products. Since there is no government body or official who is looking into the way their business is run, it is possible that the hawkers will charge exorbitant prices for the medicinal products they are selling, particularly those that may have a high demand among the buyers. Indeed, one of the conductors I talked to gave the above reasons for not allowing hawkers into his bus: He is not sure of the quality of the medicinal products they sell (where these products were manufactured and their expiry dates) and he believes that some hawkers over-price their items.

The other issue the hawkers' work raises is access to healthcare. The fact that the bus corridors have become a medical centre, so to speak, where the passengers learn about different medicines that treat the illnesses afflicting them or their relatives shows that there is a gap in public health messaging/marketing in Uganda, since this

information should ideally be available at a nearby hospital or health centre or on mass media channels like radio and television. Many people are hungry for information on the different diseases that are rampant in the country (diabetes, hypertension, skin infections and so forth). It is partly because of this (besides the use of humour) that they ardently listen to the hawkers as they advertise their medicinal wares. If the passengers had access to public health information and healthcare facilities (both private and public) where they can receive medical attention for any ailment whenever the need arises, they would not take the hawkers seriously.

It is significant that the hawkers perform their jokes in a local language, Luganda. If we accept Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's view that the continued use of English and other European languages in African literature is a clear case of mental colonization which robs African languages of vitality since African writers enrich European languages instead of their own (1986; 1998), then we need to commend these hawkers for working in their local languages, usually Luganda and Runyankore. This gives those passengers who did not go to school an opportunity to follow the conversation and to enjoy the humour being performed, the way the use of Pidgin does in the Nigerian setting (Raheem, 2018, p. 80).

It is worth remembering that Ngũgĩ's stance on the use of English and other European languages is informed by Nigerian critic Obiajunwa Wali's polemical article "The Dead End of African Literature?" A response to the proceedings of the June 1962 conference for African writers of English Expression held at Makerere University, Uganda, Wali argued that "African literature as now understood and practiced" leads to a dead end because it "is merely a minor appendage in the mainstream of European literature," lacking "any blood and stamina" (1963, p. 13). Oriented towards English-speaking European and American countries and the few college-educated Africans, such literature—Wali contends—excludes most African people who have not had the fortune to acquire European education. Besides, it hinders the development of "a truly African sensibility" since Africa's most talented writers are busy enriching European literature (1963, p. 14). While the hawkers discussed in this paper do not have this ideological reason for using Luganda or Runyankore rather than English as the medium of their work, I would like to emphasize that their choice of a local language enables them to speak directly to the passengers-as-clients without necessitating a translator. This not only fosters effective communication between the itinerant, traveling "pharmacists" and their clients, but also addresses the problem of disharmony between contemporary medical education and practice and competence in using African languages (Yusuff and Fadairo, 2019). If the guiding principle of medical practice is to "give patients the information they want or need to know in a way they can understand [and] make sure that arrangements are made, wherever possible, to meet patients' language and communication needs"—to take an example from the United Kingdom's The General Medical Council (GMC) (Sim, 2019, p. 311)—then the use of a local language in the selling of medicines on a Ugandan bus is laudable.

# Conclusion

This paper has shifted the gaze from the hawkers of medicinal products as a menace (Adum, Ekwenchi, Odogwu, and Umeh, 2019) and, instead, focused on their identity as performers in their own right whose performances (as itinerant, informal pharmacists and comedians) constitute what Otiono (2011) recognizes as "a site of agency in the social and political dynamics of the postcolony, and also [...] a site of creativity" (p. 5). True, some of the medicinal products they sell could be of dubious efficacy, but this is not the major point I am making, which is that it is precisely because of their mastery at cracking jokes that they are able to sell products of doubtful quality to the passengers, moreover at a price usually higher than one finds in pharmacies or supermarkets.

Notwithstanding the strengths of this study, there are some limitations. The major one is that the jokes discussed here are few, so they do not give a wide picture of how the hawkers on Ugandan commuter buses use humour to market their products. A larger study on the subject requires the collection of more jokes from the buses plying different routes in the country (Western Uganda, Northern Uganda, Eastern Uganda, and Central Uganda) and in different languages. Such a project will also include interviews of more passengers and conductors on these buses on their perceptions and attitudes to the hawkers of medicinal plants and the jokes they perform. Additionally, my study has not dwelt on the extent to which the humour deployed in the advertisements informs the decisions of the passengers. This is an area worth pursuing in the future, as it will provide a clearer picture of the economies of humour in the marketing of health products.

Overall, this study aims to provoke different government departments to closely examine the way they operate, with the aim of improving service delivery. Certainly, something needs to be done about the proliferation of informal if not unlawful mobile pharmacies, where different medicinal products are sold without any prescription. The study will hopefully attract the attention of the Ministry of Health to the potential perils of self-prescribing that several studies (for instance Moberly, 2014 and Fang, 2014) address, some of which are the development of drug resistance (Akello, Ovuga, Rwabukwali, Kabones and Richters, 2017), and provoking "adverse drug reactions", delaying or masking "diagnosis of a serious underlying medical problem" and increasing "the risk of potentially harmful drug-drug or drug-disease interactions" (Yusuff, 2011 p. 129). While self-prescription need not be totally disallowed since some scholars consider it a patient's right to self-medicate (Flanigan, 2012), there is need to regulate it since it can be abused for monetary benefit by the hawkers who attribute infinite healing powers to every product in their hands. Besides, the Ministry of Health needs to put in place regulations to ensure that the hawkers of medicinal products are registered and trained about the relevant facts on the wares they sell so that they do not mislead their clients. Such facts could include the products' "precise dosing, side effects, potential interactions with food and other drugs, shelf life, storage, contraindication and also precautions to be taken while using the[m] (Lutoti, Iberet, Kwiringira, and Kazibwe, 2013, p. 85). Finally, the recommendation made by Adum, Ekwenchi, Odogwu, and Umeh—that "[t]here should be an arrangement by concerned agencies to liaise with intercity commercial bus owners and drivers to check and discourage in-vehicle medication drug hawking" (2019 p. 57)—makes a lot of sense, given the dangers that unregulated hawking of medicines poses to the public. Perhaps the Transport Licensing Board of Uganda should consider withdrawing licenses of those buses that allow (unlicensed) hawkers of medicinal products on them.

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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.

[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.

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 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-

[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.

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 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

[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.

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 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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# Lexical Cohesion as a Narrative Force in the Jokes of I Go Die

## Destiny Idegbekwe

Cohesion is a texture feature of a language which helps a language user to link what has been-said to what is being said, and what would be said. The functions which cohesion – especially the lexical cohesion – plays in the creation of humour has not been well studied in the context of the Nigerian comedy industry. Hence, the current study investigates lexical connectivity as one of those conditions for the jokes stand-up comedians make to be humorous and meaningful. The major motivation behind this study is the need to unravel the level of interconnectivity of ideas and events in the jokes-of I Go Die, who is one of the most celebrated comedians in Nigeria. This study uses Halliday and Hassan's (1976) theory of cohesion in English as the framework and investigates 6 (six) purposively sampled joke extracts from the popular Nigerian stand-up comedian. The study reveals that the Joke Entry Phrase (JEP) identified in I Go Die's jokes is a lexical cohesive device which aims at getting the attention of the audience and in some instances link the new jokes to the previous ones and the theme. Also, there is a sense of cohesion in using similar concepts and actions which the audience can relate with for jokes. Also, the cohesion in humour creation is enhanced using reiterated instances.

**Keywords**: lexical cohesion, I Go Die, humour, stand-up comedy, reiteration, collocation, Nigerian stand-comedy

## Introduction

Nigerian stand-up comedians are at the forefront of popularizing the comedy genre as a central part of the entertainment industry. Taiwo (2017) opines that, "stand-up comedy, presently, constitutes the most popular type of humour in contemporary Nigeria" (p.223). Also, Ayakoroma (2013) observes that stand-up comedy presents opportunities for employment and wealth generation in modern-day Nigeria. There is no doubt that behind Nollywood (Nollywood is the popularized term referring to the Nigerian film industry, which mirrors Hollywood of the United States of America and Bollywood of India), stand-up comedy has become a key genre in the Nigerian entertainment industry, and a pivotal cultural export as Nigerian stand-up comedians have become known names in the African continent and the world.

As the Nigerian stand-up comedy industry continues to develop, there is a need for theorisation and documentation of the operations and nuances of the humour genre. A

good aspect to begin with would be the study of how meaning is created and enhanced in jokes. This is important because meaning is at the core of what makes people laugh in the sense that if the meaning of the joke is understood by the audience and interpreted as funny, laughter could be created. Cohesion—lexical cohesion in particular—is important for meaning creation in jokes because it gives the jokes the 'stick together effect', which will make it easier for the audience to follow. Lexical cohesion acts like the invisible threads that tie the ideas together. A study of its successful deployment in the jokes of I Go Die can be mirrored by up-coming comedians for better efficiency.

Nigerian stand-up comedians could be likened to storytellers. They tell funny stories to the delight of their audience. In telling the stories, there are certain conditions needed for meaningful comprehension on the part of the audience so they can receive the humour. The current study investigates lexical connectivity as one of those conditions for the jokes stand-up comedians make, to be humorous and meaningful. The major motivation behind this study is the need to unravel the level of interconnectivity of ideas and events in jokes and-the creation of laughter.

This study uses I Go Die's stand-up comedy performance at AY Live in Owerri, Nigeria as a case study. AY Live is a popular stand-up comedy show in Nigeria, where many stand-up comedians and artiste gather to thrill the audience. It is held in different cities in Nigeria, in this instance, it was at Owerri in Imo State, South East Nigeria. I Go Die, whose real name is Francis Agoda, is arguably one of the most prolific and prominent among Nigerian comedians. He created the state name I Go Die from a coinage of his surname, Agoda, which shows his ability twist or tweak what seems ordinary to create a humorous effect. He represents what Chuks Nwanne (2013) calls the second generation of Nigerian comedians whose impact has been felt both in Nigeria and abroad as one of the finest exports in the stand-up comedy industry. Also, in the opinion of Ojaide and Ojaruega (2020), I Go Die "performs extemporaneously by taking on subjects and themes from his audience's reactions and feedback and effortlessly crafts fresh jokes from them. He does not hurry over his pre-arranged delivery at a live performance" (p.86). The extemporaneous nature of his jokes makes this study important as there is a need to investigate how the comedian manages to tie his ideas together outside his pre-arranged jokes. I Go Die being one of the mainstream comedians in Nigeria makes his jokes very apt as the data of the current study because his jokes are a great representation of the Nigerian stand-up comedy genre.

As popular as Nigerian stand-up is, the genre has not received considerable-academic investigation. In the literature of stage performances and theatre in Nigeria, a lot of studies covering both the traditional stage and Nollywood productions have been carried out. (cf. Adedeji, 1969; Jeyifo, 1981; Ogunbiyi, 1981; Obafemi, 1996; Dasylva, 2005 & Ogundeji, 2005). However, comic skits (especially, some funny videos by popular comedians usually posted on Instagram and YouTube) and stand-up comedy acts have not received major attention and documentation of the features and style of performances. It is based on the above academic gap that the present study is undertaken.

# Research aim and objectives

This study is aimed at investigating the lexical cohesion in the selected jokes of I Go Die with the following objectives:

a. to investigate the use of reiteration in the selected jokes of I Go Die;
b. to investigate the use of lexical collocation in the selected joke;
c. to investigate the role related themes and events play in developing meaning in the selected jokes.

# Research Questions

The research questions designed for this study are:

a. to what extent is reiteration used in the selected jokes of I Go Die?
b. to what extent is lexical collocation deployed in the selected jokes?
c. what is the role of related themes and events in meaning creation and cohesion in the selected jokes?

# Literature Review

This section is divided into three sub-units representing the broad classification of earlier studies related to the present. The first sub-unit discusses works that highlight the historical background of Nigerian stand-up comedy. The second sub-unit presents studies that focus on the linguistic features of stand-up comedy in Nigeria while the last sub-unit is on studies that examine gender and other socio-political areas of the Nigerian stand-up comedy industry.

- **History of Nigerian Stand-up Comedy**

Studies have been carried out in the past on the development and evolvement of the Nigerian stand-up comedy. In all, these studies do not capture the argument of the present study. The present study argues that reiteration and collocation enforced using the Joke Entry Phrase (JEP) and the repetition of familiar themes and context, are elements of meaning creation through lexical connectivity. In terms of the history behind the Nigerian stand-up comedy, Bamidele (2001), exposes that the emergence of Moses Olaiya (alias Baba Sala) on the Nigerian stage gave rise to comic drama groups in Nigeria. Prior to his coming into comedy, the theatres of Hubert Ogunde, DuroLadipo and Kola Ogunmola had popularized drama on the Nigeria stage with mythical, historical, political plays as well as social plays that had to deal with issues of contemporary concern. However, they did not focus on comedy as it is done now – especially stand- up comedy (cf.Oyewo, 2006; Maduakor, 1991; Awodiya, 1995). While it would be good to study the history behind the Nigerian Stand-up comedy acts, these studies do not highlight the technical detail such as the use of lexical cohesion in the creation of jokes.

In another study, Taiwo (2017), diachronically studies comic acts from the days of Jaguar to Alibaba and finds out that there is a flourishing comedy industry in Nigeria. Taiwo (2017) is of the view that the industry is the next big thing after Nollywood. The study relies on data from interviews and other social media sources to argue that with the present situation, humour is an enormously lucrative business in Nigeria. The present study aligns to the fact that humour is prominent in Nigeria and deserves a lot of study for proper theorisation and improvement. Earlier on, it was noted that a good point to begin the theorisation of Nigerian Stand-up comedy would be a study of the cohesion techniques as an important aspect in the creation of meaning in the jokes which can also extend to the creation of laughter. That is, meaning is important and should be a veritable avenue to begin the theorisation of stand-up comedy. By theorisation, the attention is on the documentation of the operations and acts of the comedians.

Another aspect or account of the emergence of the Nigerian stand-up comedy is the account that relates the emergence of the comedy genre to the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the Babangida's administration in Nigeria in the early 80s. According to Haynes (1995), the programmed, which was intended to uplift Nigerians economically ended up impoverishing many Nigerians. It got worst to the point where many young Nigerians could not get meaningful jobs and were forced into different

fields as a means of 'survival'. One of such 'survival' means was the entertainment industry, especially the stand-up comedy. According to Ebenezer (2010), lately, the entertainment economy has experienced a surge in the population of stand-up comedians, most of whom are recent university graduates who have been turned down for conventional jobs. According to him, some of these comedians are: 'Chimamkpam Anyamkpa, Okey Bakassi, 'Basket Mouth,' Ali Baba, Henry Ndubuisi, Osaghiato Okunoghae (Talk Talk), Julius Agwu (De Genius), Klint da Drunk Abagana, Emmanuel Adigwe (D'Lectura),'Holy Mallam,' Gandoki, 'I go Die,' and Dammy Adekoya' (p. 96).

- **The Linguistic Features of the Language of Nigerian Stand-up Comedy**

The nature of the language used by Nigerian stand-up comedians has been studied from different linguistic perspectives which again is far from the tenet of the present study in investigating lexical cohesion as a thought-connecting language device deployed by Nigerian comedians, especially I Go Die. Adetunji (2013), studies the use of formulaic expressions by stand-up comedians. The study observes that 'Nigerian comedians use signature tunes to begin their monologues and as boundary markers to signal the start and end of a joke (p. 18). Also, just like any other conversation, stand-up performance aims at achieving certain goals. Adetunji (2013) notes that achieving humour through monologues is a conversation goal for stand-up comedians, hence, the need for funny signature tunes. The argument canvassed in the present study is related to the findings in Adetunji (2013) in the area of formulaic beginnings. The first part of I Go Die's jokes usually has what the present study calls the Joke Entry Phrase (JEP) which helps in getting the attention of the audience and linking the new joke to the previous joke, or the context if it is the first joke. An example is the use of the phrase *'Area o* or *Omo'* before presenting the next joke. This is important for humour creation because the JEP which is an integral part of lexical cohesion as used by the comedians enables meaning creation as the jokes would first need to make 'sense' to the audience for it to achieve the elicitation of laughter and humour.

Also, Chikogu and Efobi (2019), investigate the deployment of Nigerian Pidgin by Nigerian stand-up comedians in opposition to the official English language. The investigation notes that comedians deploy Pidgin with the aim of reaching their audience. Though it could be argued that most of the members of the audience are literate and should understand English, the comedians often perform in Pidgin. This is because the informal language is the most widely used and understood variety in Nigeria's multilingual society; it is perceived to be uniquely informal and can easily lend itself to comic adaptations (p. 30). The current study recognises the humorous implications of using Nigerian pidgin for jokes. Hence, it shuns the need of translating jokes into Standard English as the comedic effects could be lost. Also, the present study unravels how the lexical cohesion of reiteration and collocation in the form of JEP and related themes aid the creation of meaning and humour. These lexical devices studied currently are got from the Nigerian Pidgin used by I Go Die in his performances.

In another study, Filani (2016), studies the humour strategies and acts in Nigerian stand-up comedy with a focus on the data that was purposively collected from video compact disc recordings of 28 routine comedy shows in Nigeria. The data included 16 male and three female Nigerian stand-up comedians. The study reveals that humour strategies adopted by the comedians include: the manipulation of cultural assumptions, the creation and zooming of stereotypes, representations, corresponding concepts and projecting personal beliefs. In another study, Filani (2016), investigates the humourous meaning in I Go Die's jokes. Analysis from the study shows that I Go Dye adopts exaggeration, naming and labelling, self-praising, self-denigrating, and retorts as strategies for expressing humorous meanings. The present study is related to Filani (2016) as it seeks to underscore lexical cohesion as a humour strategy among Nigerian stand-up comedians and as a strategy aimed at making jokes more meaningful to the audience with

a focus on I Go Die. The meeting ground for both studies is the creation and organisation of the language of humour.

In another study, Ekpang and Bassey (2014), examine an aspect of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, which focuses on how comedy misrepresents some metaphors, social and cultural concerns of the people satirically thereby eliciting audience reaction. The study which focuses on jokes related to Calabar (Calabar is a town in South-South Nigeria, where the spoken English language is greatly influenced by Efik, which is their first language. Comedians usually play on this influence for humorous effects) words and names reveals that 'the comic presentation of the Calabar man in Nigerian stand-up comedy is either misplaced or theatrical and does not have a true representation of the Calabar people' (p. 14). If there is a literary trope which Nigerian stand-up comedians deploy, it is the use of exaggeration. The speech stereotype of Calabar men is usually heightened and zoomed on for humorous effects by many Nigerian comedians (cf. Idegbekwe, 2010). While the present study recognises the importance of metaphors, exaggerations, and theoretical acts in the creation of jokes, it argues that lexical connectivity is needed to make the exaggeration and other literary tropes more relatable to the audience to achieve meaning and humour.

- **Gender, Ideological and Sociological Studies of Nigerian Stand-up Comedy**

In another study, Bello (2016), examines the gender-related linguistic features and discourse strategies used by female and male stand-up comedians in Nigeria. The study relies on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to compare the identified features of each gender. The findings from the study show that the differences observed in the language usage of female and male comedians did not make women's speech powerless; rather, the women studied were independent and confrontational. Some of the language resources identified in the comedies support the stereotypical view about the use of language by women and men, while others did not align with previous research and are non-stereotypical. This shows that women are not only represented in number in terms of female comedians, but the language use does also not dehumanise women. Still on the gender perspectives, an earlier study by Idegbekwe (2010), investigates the stereotypes of women in the performances of Basket Mouth and I Go Die where it was discovered that Nigerian women are portrayed as beggars, hungry and greedy individuals in their jokes. However, Bello, (2016) and Idegbekwe, (2010) did not uncover how the strands of ideas are interconnected in the jokes investigated. The present study attempts an uncovering of the lexical linking or connecting strategies which I Go Die uses in his jokes.

Using Fairclough and Wodak's theories on ideologies, Filani and Ajayi (2019) investigated the nature of ideologies communicated by Nigerian stand-up comedians. The study investigated different comedy routines from the popular *Night of a Thousand Laugh* shows. At the end, the study proved that the ideology communicated in the jokes are motivated by the nation's sociocultural and political realities, which include the comedians' ideological predispositions on gender.

Lastly, Saheed Raheem (2018), investigates the level of social-political activism and non-violence resistance in the performance of Nigerian stand-up comedians. Using extracts from six randomly selected volumes of *Nite of a Thousand Laughs*, Raheem (2018) unravels the linguistic and discourse strategies deployed by comedians in their performances for civic protest and willingness to engage the government on serious national issues. Hence, Raheem (2018) concludes that 'beyond its relaxation function, stand-up comedy is a viable platform for raising socio-political consciousness' (p. 75).

From the studies investigated above, no researcher has examined the nature of cohesion and the devices which help in improving the arrangement of materials for the stand-up comedians. There is a need to unravel the functions which reiteration and collocational usages play in jokes.

# Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion covers the interconnectivity of text that is implemented by lexical means. If there is an aspect to zoom in on in the study of stand-up comedy, it would be the linguistic aspect. This is because language is at the core of what comedians perform on stage. This is not reflected in the reviewed literature-as earlier studies focused on the literary aspects of stand-up comedy. This is not to say that the literary aspect is not important or is exclusive of linguistic features but that the conclusion is geared towards aesthetics. The creation of meaning is important for the comedian to be humorous. This is because the audience needs to comprehend the joke in order to digest its humour.

Achieving cohesion in the rendition of jokes is important for comedians. Cohesion refers to the internal connectivity in a language which enables language users to join different strands of utterances to communicate or to make meaning. Cohesion aids the language users to tie what has been said to what is being said and makes what would be said relevant. According to Kunz and Lapshinova-Koltunski (2015), the earliest study of cohesion in English was conducted by Roman Jakobson, who analysed the syntactic structures and parallelism in literary texts with reference to poetry (p. 21).

In 1964, it was Michael Halliday who first divided cohesion into grammatical cohesion and lexical cohesion. Later, Hasan made a detailed exploration into grammatical cohesion. Before the publication of Michael Halliday and Ruquiyatu Hasan's *Cohesion in English* in 1976, several other relevant cohesion studies became available. The method by which cohesion works in English are well exposed (cf. Halliday and Hassan (1976); Widdowson (1978), Carrel (1982), Fulcher (1989), Emezue (1999), Ballard (2001), Yeh (2004), Taskanen (2006), Idegbekwe (2014) and (2019).Halliday and Hassan (1976), identified five resources with which language users cohere their speech. These resources include reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and the lexical cohesion.

Lexical cohesion is the last resource identified by Halliday and Hasan (1976). They recognize mainly two broad types of lexical cohesion: reiteration and collocation. Reiteration occurs when in a text, a word is repeated, a synonym or a near synonym, a subordinate or a general word is used to replace a word already mentioned in the text (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 281). The lexical cohesion of reiteration makes use of the open class items mainly. This makes it very different from the use of reference which focuses on the use of prenominal items. For collocation, it occurs in a text if some words that appear or are used in the same field are used together. Collocation is close to registers and language according to domain and field. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 285):

> There is always the possibility of cohesion between any pair of lexical items which are in some ways associated with each other in the language and the cohesive effect of such pairs depends not so much on any systematic and semantic relationship as on their tendency to share the same lexical environment to occur in collocation with another.

# Methodology

This study is mainly qualitative as the lexical cohesive features of I Go Die's jokes are examined. This is justified because qualitative research seeks to the features and characteristics of a concept or an entity. The study employed the purposive sampling technique to select 6 (six) relevant extracts which were then translated retaining the Nigerian Pidgin form with which it was delivered. This is done to retain the humorous elements as they may be lost if translated to Standard English. In the analysis of the data,

each of the extracts is examined from the perspective of how the lexical cohesive device of reiteration, collocation and synonym are deployed.

# Presentation and Analysis of Data

**Joke 1**

*Area!*
*Oboy, no be small thing oh*
*Na all these eh… of of the kings of comedy, dem AY take dey put person for work. Time now na to two. Peopledey crack jokes since, people don laugh tire. All the jaws don dey pain people. una wan come bring me come make I perform now, if people no laugh, una go say I Go Die no funny whereas all of una don shout say he is the king of comedy, the prince of comedy, the wizard of comedy, one of the warriors of comedy (audience laughs)…The problem for this country be say we too dey hail too much…. For this country everybody get name when them take dey hail them. If them hail you for this country, your money go finish…. my sir, my politician, my senator.*

Some words play key roles in the narration of the joke above. I Go Die enters the stage, there is a loud ovation with shouts and clapping of hands. He quickly calms the audience with a popular Joke Entry Phrase (JEP): *Area! Oboy, no be small thing oh.* Area in Nigerian Pidgin does not mean area (an environment) in the sense in which it is meant in English. Rather, *Area* is a rallying word that could also be used for greetings and social pleasantries. The use of *Area* prompts the audience to be attentive that a joke is about to be rendered. Based on cohesion, the JEP is of importance because it connects the audience's attention to the imminent action. Now, what is to come is in direct link with the way the comedian was introduced on stage. He was introduced as *the king, warrior and leader of Nigerian comedy*. This is an introduction which he uses to link the first joke and the subsequent ones. By reiterating the idea of the praise names showered on him, he is able to connect with his audience because they understand what he means as it was played out before them some moments ago and it is common in the Nigerian discourse to have people introduced with titles and epithets beyond them. I Go Die reiterates the praise by using a common name for such a phenomenon in Nigerian Pidgin which is the idea of '*hailing.'* The use of hailing reiterates the praises and the continuous emphasis on some popular means with which Nigerians praise people is a form of semantic collocation with similar structures. Hence, *the king of comedy, the prince of comedy, the wizard of comedy, one of the warriors of comedy, my sir, my politician,* and *my senator* are collocational items which the audience can clearly relate with. It also drives home the message through a repeated use of the praise words.

**Joke 2**

*Area!*
*You see this election when dey come so, if you see the Presidential candidates, them reach 50. Many of them believe say them go win oooh- na people for their street dey hail them-Oga, you don win, no need for posters na…Them go dey hail, our President, our governor, the people's man-hailing, if them hail you eh… if some just see me, them go just shout Ambassador-no name and title them no dey give me, my warrior. All na to make you drop money.*

After I Go Die presents Joke 1, the audience is engulfed in loud laughter and clapping of hands. Again, to bring them back to the present performance, he uses the Joke Entry Phrase (JEP). This time around, he uses only *area* which brings the laughter down and another increased level of concentration from the audience. This is a cohesion device because the audience needs to be quiet and attentive to follow the message in the joke which, as we have seen earlier, is built up in the narrative modes.

In the joke, I Go Die narrates a story connected to the number of presidential candidates for the 2019 Nigerian election cycle. Following the earlier established frame of praises (*hailings*), the comedian links the high number of candidates to the continuous and unrealistic praise singing most Nigerians get especially from the poor to the rich. Hence, it is easy to overrate oneself. This presents an extension to the idea of *hailings*which he had earlier established.

There is a sense of reiteration in repeated structures like: *na people for their street dey hail them-Oga, you don win, no need for posters na..Them go dey hail, our President, our governor, the people's man-hailing, if them hail you eh*… The reliance of exotic titles is suiting qualifying adjectives for Joke 2 and similar to Joke 1 as they collocate for praise names and expletives in the Nigerian social cultural context.

**Joke 3**

*One guy hail me, I make up my mind say I no go give am money; no be small hailing o- the man just dey say my warrior, my king… I dey try shook hand for pocket to bring out money, the man continue to dey hail; e come start dey talk things like: my wizard, my wintch, my ogbanje, papi water. I change my mind.*

The joke above does not have the typical JEP we have identified earlier. However, the comedian creatively accounts for that by linking the present joke with the earlier one with the running word *hail* in:*One guy hail me*. This helps the audience understand that the present joke is in some ways similar to the previous ones on the same subject matter. The repeated use of the word *hail* in the joke also helps in making the joke better understood by the audience.

The main argument of the present study is that there is an inner link or connection which is ensured when words are repeated or when phrases of similar structures are used in a joke. It helps the language user (in this case, the comedian connects thoughts easily with the audience. Though Joke 3 seems to be the negative form of praise taken overboard as the individual, I Go Die, is praised in derogatory terms (perhaps, the individual lacks better words to use after exhausting all in his vocabulary), it is still related to the general theme of unnecessary praise as a running idea in the performance.

In terms of structural reiteration and repetition*, my wizard, my witch, my ogbanje, papi water* as used in the joke are related and they collocate because they all connote negative ideas. For example, a wizard is only the male form of the witch, while *ogbanje* in the Igbo folk tradition connotes a demonized child that comes to trouble the parents and the society. The Igbo term *ogbanje,* literally means one who comes and goes back (form of birth and rebirth), it traditionally reflects a form of inconsistency in life and shorter life span afterwards. Also, *papi water* is a Nigerian neologism or coinage of the male version of mermaid popularly known in the Nigerian linguistic context as *mami water*. So, in terms of collocation, there is an inner thread of connection and resemblance which implicitly tie the ideas for the audience to better understand the joke. The ability of the audience to comprehend the jokes is a necessary condition exuding laughter or humour. In another sense, *papi water* is popularly believed by many Nigerians to be creators of wealth. This becomes relevant for meaning interpretation based on the fact that the individual presenting these praises needs money and sees I Go Die as a source at that material time. Hence, he is a *papi water*.

**Joke 4**

*This country nahailings o…*
*You see, this country, everybody na 419 (repeated) you go here things like, do you know who I am?Just come outside, everybody dey claim to be something. Do you know who I am? You are talking to me like that? Do you know who you are talking to? Motor get accident, you go dey see persondey say do you know who I am?Na so one drive Prado one day, all these people when dey drive keke, them no get respect*

*oh-somebody dey drive prado, one guy just jam am- I shock-the guy wey get the Prado, big man, na once demdey know them, the guy just come down, look im motor like this (demonstrates). im just deylaff from laff, imkneel down start dey cry dey shout, you don kill me oo. Even me surprise come dey ask wetindey do this guy until one guy tell say the man wen dey inside the Prado Jeep no get money na motor wen dem take send am message. Just imagine the forming before.*

Again Joke 4 has its own JEP which is: *This country nahailings o*… This is a carryover from the previous jokes. As we have earlier observed, the JEP helps in eliciting the audience's attention for the new joke and introduces the new joke as somewhat like the previous. This study argues that it is deliberately done by IGo Die for effective delivery of the jokes and for better comprehension by the audience. In most cases, the JEP is said by the comedian and he waits for a few moment for the audience to follow through for the new act.

There is link between Joke 4 and the previous jokes on 'deceitful praises.' The comedian sees the act of praising people unnecessarily by Nigerians as a form of deceit. Hence, he says in the new jokes after the JEP *You see, this country, everybody na 419 (repeated).* A *419,* in the Nigerian context is a fraud because that is the section of the constitution that covers the punishment for economic frauds and other forms of deceits. Calling individuals titles which do not belong to them or ascribing titles that are unmerited in order to gain favour from the individual is a form of fraud. That makes most people culpable because the Nigerian society thrives on that.

In the context of Joke 4, the fraud is not only in calling names but individuals ascribing a sense of importance to them. This is reiterated in the use of: *do you know who I am? Just come outside, everybody dey claim to be something. Do you know who I am? You are talking to me like that? Do you know who you are talking to?* In this case, it is not about other Nigerians praising someone else for monetary gains it is about individuals trying to gain a sense of importance and reverence to themselves to appear significant to the society. It is a form of deceit; hence, it is related to the idea of praise singing and connects well with it. These questions which I Go Die uses here are common among Nigerians as most of the people may have used them in the past or heard someone use them in similar situations as the ones captured by the comedian. The invisible connection between the current created situation and the one the audience knew before is linked to the creation of humour and the comprehension of the jokes.

In terms of collocation, Joke 4 is built on recurring structures of interrogative constructions which reinforces the image of personal importance which Nigerians attach to themselves to deceive others. The repetition of popular phrases like the ones highlighted can make the message more emphatic to the audience. Also, the creation of humour is linked with the abundance of images created through reiterations and instances of collocations. This is also reinforced with a story that shows that most Nigerians using exotic cars on the roads are just showing off as the cars belong to other persons.

**Joke 5**

*Everybody dey form whereas no money… See many young men wen suppose don marry but lack of government planning-people no dey fit marry- ven those when marry self, don divorce e no reach one year because money no dey. Na money dey sustain relationship-without money, marriage cannot work. Somebody go dey shout money is not everything-who tell you, who tell you, money is the foundation, get am first before you marry. No money, behave yourself- see our youth dem ready marry but no money. People are stranded-the country is confused, the President is confused, everything is confused. But politicians go still dey package…*

In the joke extract above, the earlier theme of vain praises and deceit is modified to accommodate a similar idea. In this case, the use of synonym as cohesive marker plays

the role linking the previous theme and easing it to the current. The sentence: *Everybody dey form whereas no money* as the first statement introducing the new joke has the Nigerian Pidgin word *form* which also means to deceive, to pretend. Recall that in the previous joke, I Go Die says all Nigerians are 419 (fraudulent) because they can eulogize an individual by calling him/her names and titles that they have not been earned, all in an attempt to make the person being deceitfully praised to feel important. In the present joke, the deceit is on how many Nigerians pretend to be rich whereas they are not. The act of making jokes from similar concepts and actions which the audience can easily relate with has a sense of cohesion which can build a kind of texture for the text for overall coherence.

Also criticizing the lack of money in the nation and among the citizens, the comedian relies on the use of repetition of phrases such as: *no money* (used 4 times), *money* (used 7 times) which help to ensure a reiteration of the idea and creates an inner link. The lack of money brings negative effects which are also evident in the reiterated cohesion force enforced by the consistent use of negative phrases such as: *No money, dem ready marry but no money. People are stranded; the country is confused; the President is confused, everything is confused.* The continuous use of the words which suggest negative effects helps to emphasise the message that the nation is not rich though the people and the politicians would wish to pretend.

**Joke 6**

*Even the package don reach for our girls…. dem go package bobby wen be like pimples, girls go just put all the foam wen dey this world, -carry bobby, bobby go reach neck. Some girls no get yarnsh, e go wear yansh. yarnsh go come be like this (demonstrating). You go see yarnsh, the person don cross, yarnsh still dey road. Person go short go package herself wear high heel. This country everybody na 419.*

In Joke 6, the attention shifts slightly to the deceitful attitudes of some Nigerian girls. This is also linked in many ways to the running theme in the earlier jokes. To make this link more concrete, I Go Die uses a synonym of deceit in Nigerian parlance (*package*) as a key word in the JEP. *Packaging* in the context of Nigerian English usage, is a form of deceit; trying to create the impression of a 'thing' or a concept that is not exactly true. The word *package* is then used three times with a synonym in the last statement which is: *This country everybody na 419.* The idea of fraud in the statement is closely related to the idea of *packaging.* This points to the fact that if words which are closely related are used or there is a case of direct repetition, there is usually a cohesive force in such usages. The humour has to be made clear to the audience and proven beyond all reasonable doubt that it exists. The inner connectivity is needed to achieve such level of clarity. A joke is no joke if it cannot be understood by the audience because of the context.

In this joke, the deceit is in the ways many Nigerian ladies fraudulently deceive men by wearing enhancing pads on their boobs and buts to make them look attractive momentarily. The humour in the joke is extended through acts of exaggeration where the comedian says the boobs will be so high, close to the neck while the buts would be so massive that it takes time to move across the road. However, beyond the use of other literary devices for the creation of humour, the joke is made more comprehensible because it is an extension of what has been espoused by the comedian in the previous joke and the key words deployed are either same with the previous or synonyms of the previous which help in creating a cohesive tie. Apart from that such acts of deceit by many Nigerian ladies abound and they are common in public discourse in the nation. So, it is not something too new to the audience.

# Discussion of Findings

From the analysis, the study notes that the Joke Entry Phrase (JEP) identified in I Go Die's jokes is a lexical cohesive device aimed at eliciting the attention of the audience and in some instances link the new jokes to the previous ones and the theme. This validates the findings of Adetunji (2013) which investigates the formulaic nature of Nigerian stand-up comedian jokes where it was discovered that such formulas like the JEP are aimed at achieving conversational goals and humour creation. Also, there is a sense of cohesion in using similar concepts and actions which the audience can relate with for jokes. This cohesion is enhanced using reiteration of instances. This also goes far in validating one of the arguments in this study which is that there is an inner link or connection which is ensured when words are repeated or when phrases of similar structures are used in a joke.

The ability to create jokes out of situations that the audience can mentally link with the immediate events and the preceding jokes is a cohesion strategy. These instances of cohesion use may not be part of those recognised by Halliday and Hassan (1976) and may not be intentionally deployed by the comedian. This means that like other language users, I Go Die may not be aware that he is using a cohesive device; but, naturally, as a language user, the task is to find the best possible means to be communicative. However, from the analysis above, it is obvious that it works. In the opinion of I Go Die (the case study), the spontaneous approach which he adopts in most of his performances 'allows a steady flow of issues and a simple disposition… So, that keeps the audience to easily get in touch with the issues surrounding the jokes' (Onikoyi, 2016 qtd in Ojaideand Ojaruega, 2020, p. 86). This also follows an earlier finding that I Go Die's spontaneity which connects with the audience and the event context creates a strong rapport with his audience (Ojaide and Ojaruega, 2020).

# Conclusion

The invisible thread of cohesion ties different contexts for language utterances to be meaningful. These contexts in the instance of Nigerian stand-up comedy would include the time, the cognitive and the physical contexts of the audience in relation to the jokes. The comedian's ability to cleverly bring the contexts into play in jokes can go a long way in making the jokes more relatable, humorous, and meaningful to the audience. The current study reveals that lexical cohesion is a key element in the creation of humour and the audience's comprehension of the jokes. The lexical cohesion in this instance acts as the imaginary line or thread that ties the dangling parts of a joke. As the audience laughs, the comedian looks for another related idea in context to continue the performance. Anything contrary may create a disconnection between the audience, the comedian and the joke.

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# 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 byhis childhood friendsduring the period the alcoholic drink "Gordons' Spark" and "Gordons' 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 is 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 play 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 beenextracted 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." Gordons 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 2011to 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 Klinic* 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 comediennes 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 a 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 Masquarade.* More on the veterans' list are Sadiq Daba, alias Bitrus; AgbonifoEnaruna, 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 Osagahe, 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 Ndonye, 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 swoop 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 ↑ ch<u>ur</u>:ch I went TO was >Celestial church<

((AUDIENCE LAUGHING))

(5) ALL ↑those PE<u>o</u>ple 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↓$^{0}$go$^{0}$

(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↑$^{0}$oh$^{o}$____ 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 own<u>STRI:</u>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 ↑ <u>ch</u>ur: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↓$^{0}$go$^{0}$
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)

((AUIDEANCE SHOUTING AND LAUGHING))

(8) ↑Omo RUN↑$^{0}$oh$^{o}$——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 STRI:PES 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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# Standing Up, Talking Back: Stand-up Comedy, African Immigrants and Belonging in Canada

## Eyitayo Aloh

Stand-up comedy offers African immigrants in Canada space for performing their identity as immigrants, negotiating belonging, resisting stereotypes, and utilising humour to hold a conversation with diverse audiences. Unlike other popular cultural forms such as music and film that require a hefty budget and large, technical production sets—often unavailable to many struggling immigrants—stand-up comedy provides an affordable artistic avenue as well as community interaction for immigrant practitioners. This paper examines stand-up comedy and how it has been utilised by African immigrants as a tool for social awareness, integration and coping with the attendant challenges of being a new arrival in a new country without losing their African identity using an African cultural lens to conduct performance analyses of two African-immigrant comics in Canada. The paper also explores how stand-up comedy functions as a form of resistance to the widely held and often repeated—yet unsubstantiated—image of the immigrant as a social liability.

Keywords: Immigration, stand-up comedy, resistance, belonging, Canada, Africa

## Introduction

My mother, a strong and beautiful woman, believes in the power of the spoken word. To drive home her point of never underestimating the power of the spoken word, she always recites the Yoruba proverb: *Ti'takun ba p'enu po, won a ri Erin mu* (Literally: If Spiders can speak with one voice and collaborate, they will conquer an elephant). To my mother, the spoken word can accomplish seemingly impossible tasks, and when imbued with humour, joy will follow. That is why she is always full of stories, always singing and always relying on the verbal performance of her identity as a wife, teacher and mother to bring laughter and joy to her household.

It would appear that those words by my mother had been heard across the ocean in Canada, as the spoken word, the oral recital of poetry and performances on stage, became popular in the 1800s. For example, Pauline Johnson popularized poetry performance on stage with her indigenous props and evocations which gained her global fame in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Strong-Boag and Gerson 2000).

However, in the 1970s, a significant cultural shift in oral performance on stage occurred as, "Comedy replaced poetry as the main avant-garde verbal performance art with comedy clubs springing up in almost every city in the western world", establishing stand-up comedians as the new celebrities of the literary world and as social commentators (Davies 1993, xii). As a genre of humour, stand-up comedy took a giant leap in the realm of popular culture in the 1980s, moving from the comedy clubs to mainstream media including radio and television. Cable television producers, eager to meet the demand for more content began to tape comedy shows in clubs and transmit them through television, thus propelling the status of stand-up comedy as a form of popular culture (Auslander 2008).

A French language comedy festival for stand-up comedians, *Just for Laughs*, was established in Montreal in the summer of 1984, bringing together solely French-speaking comedians for a two-day festival of comedy and laughter. Due to the success of the event, it became a month-long festival two years later, with anglophone performers added to the bill to make it a truly Canadian event. Underscoring the importance of television at this time in the dissemination of humour to Canadian homes, the festival was taped for later broadcasting by both Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and Comedy Network, and would provide the platform for many African-immigrant comedians such as Boucar Diouf (Senegal), Fatima Dhowre (Somalia) and Arthur Simeon (Uganda) to launch their careers in stand-up comedy (Edinborough 1984).

For African immigrants in Canada, stand-up comedy opens up a new space for performing their identity as immigrants, negotiating belonging, and having a conversation through the medium of humour with diverse audiences. Unlike music and movies that require a hefty budget and large, technical production sets—often unavailable to a struggling immigrant—stand-up comedy provides an affordable outlet of artistic interaction for immigrant practitioners. After all, the requirements for a stand-up comedy set are quick wits, strong verbal content that is laced with humour, and a microphone. Of course, a vivacious personality also helps in delivering the laughs required to be successful on stage.

It is the spontaneity of stand-up comedy and the ability to create an instant "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) through shared laughter that transgresses social codes, especially among audience members, that makes it an important art form for our analysis of humour in the negotiation of belonging and community amongst African immigrants in Canada. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on how stand-up comedy has been utilised by African immigrants in Canada as a tool for social awareness, integration, and coping with the attendant problems of being new arrivals in a new country.

I argue that stand-up comedy helps to challenge stereotypes while functioning as a form of resistance to the widely held and oft-repeated—if unsubstantiated—image of the immigrant as a social liability and lecherous opportunist; the idea that the immigrant is "lazy, indolent, lawless and untrustworthy" (Foster 1996, 23). It is also worth noting that the stand-up comedy scene is responsible for creating jobs and putting many aspiring immigrants on stage, thus affording them the opportunity to pursue comedy as a career as part of their active contributions to Canadian society. Many are developing an exceptional initiative to promote and perform in the highly competitive world of show business (Stebbins 1990).

Methodologically, I draw upon two comedians on the Canadian circuit who are from Sub-Saharan Africa, Boucar Diouf (Senegal) and Arthur Simeon (Uganda), as case studies. I analyse the influence of their African roots and elements of cultural memory in the way they tell jokes and deploy humour in negotiating their belonging in Canadian society and resistance to negative stereotypes. I have rendered some of the jokes in their original West African pidgin, while also drawing on samples from visiting comedians as a way of signaling the similarities in the form of humour used by both visiting African comedians and their resident Canadian counterparts.

# Continental origins of African stand-up comedy in Canada

As a genre of comedy, standup appears to be the easiest to define. As the name implies, it involves a comic standing in front of a live audience and telling jokes in an attempt to elicit laughter amongst the audience members. After all, the only requirements are quick wits, strong verbal content laced with humour and a microphone. Of course, a vivacious personality also helps (Dean 2000). It is the spontaneity of this genre and the ability to create instant an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) through shared laughter that helps transgress social codes. A quick-witted comedian and his audience can become one entity very quickly.

When a performer stands in front of the audience, he brings them into the community by drawing on shared experiences to create jokes that will generate laughter. This laughter creates an "insider status" among the audience who "gets it," and leaves out all who do not. And, because the jokes by most stand-up comedians either draw directly from their immigrant experience or draw from their shared cultural memory, a community of shared laughter is created under the roof of the comedy club (Boskin 1986; Chiaro 1992). Speaking about the community created by jokes, Peter Kivy (2003) observes that:

> The joke, then, when it works, when we "get it," reminds us that we are "we"; that we are a group, a community. What community? Well, obviously, whatever community has fulfilled the conditions presupposed by the joke. And that community might be ethnic, national, professional, *cultural*, religious, whatever. But it would be a group within the human family and for that moment, isolated from it. (6, emphasis mine)

Thus an immigrant comedian and the audience members from similar backgrounds are members of a community. In African oral performances, every performer is considered a member of the community and only repeating what already belongs to the community as part of their jokes. And that is why the call-and-response narrative technique, that we will consider shortly, is popular among African standup comedians.

In order to be able to create that community of laughter with their audience, a comedian must be able to utilize stand-up in such a way that makes the audience part of the humour creation instead of simply its consumers. And, since call and response is a key performative part of African narrative tradition that brings in the audience into storytelling, then drawing the audience into a community as part of a standup routine is common. For us to be able to understand how an immigrant comedian is able to create a community with their audience in ways that are different from a Canadian-born comedian, we must look at the origin and characteristics of stand-up comedy in both cultures.

European oriented stand-up comedy in Canada and its American counterpart comes from the narrative monologues of theatre actors that preceded the actual theatre performance with a monologue designed to keep the audience entertained while the actors prepared. However, the monologue performers were mirroring the

jugglers in the medieval carnival who juggled and told jokes at the same time to amuse the audience or perform magic before the big carnival parade started (Double 2005, 17-18). With specific reference to stand-up comedy in North America, Mark Twain is often credited as the first stand-up comedian but in reality, Mark Twain was an after-dinner speaker at corporate events who used humour to distinguish his act and became famous for it (Gribben 1985, 48). However, the core element of Twain's performance remains steeped in monologue just like the theatre performers and one-liners that subverts well established social norms such as "why do today that which you can leave till tomorrow' (ibid).

In the African context, however, stand-up comedy is rooted in the oral narrative tradition, a practice shared by most cultures. The stories are embedded with humour to draw the audience in as the storyteller engages them in a dialogue. Mel Watkins (1994) states that verbal word play and witty storytelling contests can be specifically traced to a number of African groups, especially the Yoruba peoples of western Nigeria and the Ashanti peoples of Ghana. These contests, performed to an audience, would serve as a precursor to the development of jokes as standalone objects in African society (19). William Schechter (1970) also shares this belief in the oral roots of African folk humour by specifically providing the example of the satirical word play by Ashanti peoples of Ghana called *opo*.

The narratives upon which the humour is based are also not a *monologue*, like the European tradition, but a *dialogue* that engages the audience in the production of the humour. For instance, amongst the Yoruba peoples of western Nigeria, the call and response is not just part of music and song tradition, but equally an integral part of the storytelling tradition, which themselves have music and humour embedded in them for effect. Usually, before the storyteller engages in a longer narrative, they set the tone by engaging in a game of riddles and jokes called *alo apamo*. Often this calls for the storyteller to use their whole body as a theatrical prop, part of an expressive form of humour that is closely related to a farce especially when their funny riddles are met with incorrect responses by members of the audience. Some members of the audience even get involved in humour production by testing the storytelling skills of the narrator with a deliberately incorrect answer, then insisting on the answer's correctness, thus elongating the narration of the joke – all to the amusement of their fellow audience. This is often referred to as *efe*.

Isidore Okpewho (1992, 159) suggests that this technique of call and response employed during the telling of jokes may be to get the audience mentally prepared for the longer narrative to follow or just to set the tone for the entertainment of the evening. What is clear is that the audience and the society are part of the production of humour as opposed to a monologue whereby only the comedian speaks to the audience and the only participation expected of the audience is their laughter.

*Efe* literal definition is 'joke' or 'humour' in Yoruba and looking at *efe* and its musical accompaniment amongst the Egbado clan, of the Yoruba nation, Michael Olatunji (2007) states that, "*Efe* (performances) which integrates masks and dance provides an ample opportunity for the performers to criticize, deride and ridicule any individual member or an organisation, of whatever status, in the community who had contravened the laws and ethics of that particular society" (27).

The corrective nature of stand-up from Africa is also emphasized by Olatunji. Oftentimes, the performers or storyteller will use the mannerism and idiosyncrasies of a particular member of the society and ask the audience members to decode. Once the audience correctly deciphers the individual that is being ridiculed, the storyteller pushes the burden of proof and knowledge to the audience members, thus avoiding any form of censorship (32).

It is from this oral tradition of storytelling and humour that African comedians who engage in stand-up comedy in Canada draw upon for their craft. And since it is a

communal action that involves every member of the society in production of humour, anyone, including musicians, can assume the personae of the comic and tell a narrative joke, as long as there is a willing audience to participate.

A notable example is a July 2018 performance by Afrobeat musician Femi Kuti in Toronto to a largely immigrant audience. Recapping one of the famous "Yabis" (ridicule) of the ruling class by his more established father and Afrobeat King, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the following dialogue ensued:

> Femi: As all of una plenty for here and una don run comot for home, na who pursue[1] una. (So many of you gathered here have run away from home – Nigeria – who chased you out?)
>
> Audience: Different Answers
>
> Femi: You, you say wetin? (What do you say?) (Pause) Well, I no know, but me I say Baba, if you say Gida, na you get your mouth. (I don't know about your answer but I will say Baba, if you say Gida, you own your mouth).

Here, Femi draws on the traditional *efe* performance genre to crack a joke before a musical performance with an audience effectively integrated into the humour production. The object of ridicule may be far removed from the performance space and never mentioned in full, but is implied. The Nigerian audience will identify the name of a former military president, General Babangida, that the artist chose to split in half, requesting the audience to complete the name. His story is also about their journey as immigrants which he lays squarely at the feet of the corrupt leader. The joke is definitely on the Nigerian ruling class, but is also a reminder to the immigrants of the decadent political leadership or the circumstances that literally forced them abroad or into exile as the case may be. Femi Kuti's performance therefore exemplifies the African oral performance as one that encompasses the narrative joke style, often mixed with music and audience participation, and therefore departing from the monologue that evolved into the American and European styles of stand-up today.

These joke styles, according to Elliot Oring (2009), heavily relies on the "punchline" by the comic. However, with the narrative joke technique, there are multiple punchlines, spread across the story and often relying on the audience for the humour to be enacted, something Oring describes as the "comic tale" (9).

From an African perspective, the "comic tale" is part of the larger story or folktale, and the story is incomplete without humour. Similarly, when the story is paired with jokes and audience participation, it distinguishes the stand-up performance of African comedians from that of their Canadian-born counterparts that rely heavily on monologue which strings together different, unrelated jokes with a "punchline" often with no input from the audience. Conversely, for the African comic, the stories are often folktales that belong to an entire community, it forms part of their cultural memory that they bring to the fore on the performance stage. The stand-up comedy of African-immigrant performers in Canada is intrinsically connected to their roots in Africa.

Therefore, the key difference between the European style of stand-up comedy and those from Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, is monologue as opposed to dialogue. Stand-up comedy in the western world is a monologue by one performer while the one practiced in Africa or based on cultures from Africa is characterised by dialogue, a conversation between the performer and his audience. In drawing this conclusion, I recognize that modern comedic expression in parts of Europe and

[1] I have translated the Nigerian Pidgin language that is used for the dialogue to make it more accessible, especially for people who are unfamiliar with the language.

Canada now have recorded laughter inserted, often referred to as “canned laughter.” Yet, the mechanical insertion takes away from the kind of dialogic participation that African comedians draw from their audience, which is a remnant of the call and response tradition of African storytelling art.

# Negotiating identity, finding place: The stand-up comedy of Boucar Diouf

Humour has the power to multiply, sending out multiple meanings and addressing different audiences at once. It is an effective method of creating “the dichotomies and contradictions that shape the lives” of marginalized groups while “overturning stereotypical assumptions about the group […] and [serves to] unite diverse groups by bringing them together in laughter” (Andrews 2011, 3-4). In negotiating their belonging in Canadian society, the immigrant comedian can call upon humour as a tool. Part of the performative negotiation process may involve the comedian embracing his position as an immigrant, and rather than feeling any hegemonic pressure, use it to their advantage just as oppressed groups in medieval times were able to during carnivals (Bakhtin, 1968).

Boucar Diouf represents the comedian who has been able to do this; perform the dual role of "playing the fool" and controlling the negotiation of his integration into his new society with comedy. His comedy has the unique capacity to address fellow immigrants, other marginalized groups in Canada and other members of society who do not fall into these categories while integrating them into a unified audience and community of laughter.

Born in Senegal, Diouf came to Canada in 1991 as a marine biologist for his graduate school education. He obtained his Ph.D and worked at the University of Quebec. According to him, science did not give him the opportunity to be able to fully represent his African identity and so he opted for comedy as a way to "be African" while trying to be the model immigrant in Canada.

Integration, racial tension and the immigrant experience form the core of Diouf's comedy routine and has impacted multiple audiences across French-speaking Canada, but resonates the most with his immigrant community. Diouf has been able to use his comedy to bring an alliance within the francophone African community in Quebec while fostering a connection with other marginalized groups, especially with the First Nations of Quebec. Yet his comedy cuts across the racial divide as he manages to appeal to settler audiences as well. Diouf calls his art the comedy of “interculturality” with the single aim of opening up spaces for communication. He once joked to a television audience while holding a coconut with a hat on:

> Coconuts are the best immigrants. They fall from a tree on their home islands and roll into the sea. Then the sea takes them far away to another island. Then they call to the crab to help them and then the crab comes and cuts them lose. The coconut is free because he gets help from the crabs and then he takes root in his new environment. Immigrants are like coconuts. There are things you bring with you and you can use them to take root, but you cannot say ‘I will not change. I will change my surroundings instead. Well, home is too heavy to move, so better make use of the crabs you see and receive their help to flourish and take root in your new home (Diouf, 2016).

There is a play on Diouf’s scientific and social side in the joke but the message of social cohesion as a path to social integration is not lost. He encourages fellow migrants to imitate the coconut and “get help from the crab,” the people that are already in Canada, or specifically Quebec as that was the primary audience he was addressing. That is the only way that they can take “root’ or be integrated into society by living harmoniously with its other members. While it is good to retain part of the

culture from home, he reminds them of a salient reality: home is fixed in a place and they cannot physically bring it with them. Identity, to Diouf, is not just about roots, but about everything else that makes up the person.

Is Diouf asking his fellow immigrant to abandon who they are? He answers: a coconut is still a coconut. Nothing can change a person. Nothing can take away the cultural identity of immigrants and they can still use their cultural identity to their advantage in taking root in Canada, to perform the multiple identities that the move to Canada has imposed. Diouf's statement aligns with Edward Said's (1993) idea that "no one is today purely one thing and labels… are only the starting point.' (8).

But the narrative joke has a message for non-immigrants as well. Diouf turns and with a big smile asks, "are you a good crab? Do we provide the needed help for the immigrant? The crab also gets food while helping the coconut out of his shell and this kind of assistance is what we are not seeing regularly for the immigrant". Like the crab, when immigrants are helped, society benefits. Immigration brings mutual benefit and humour is Diouf's vehicle for preaching that message.

To Diouf, communication is the link between his scientific and artistic sides. In science, he aims to communicate his research effectively to his peers and students, while he hopes to communicate the value of integrating everyone into a cohesive society through his comedy. "I want people to really appropriate this country and explore this country. Hatred of immigrants only limits the possibility of what we can achieve when we come together and embrace our diversity" (Diouf 2016).

For us to see how he accomplishes all of these multiple tasks with humour, let us focus on his performance set for the "Pour une raison X ou Y" (For an X or Y reason) tour of Quebec between 2016 and 2017.

The multiple function of Diouf's comedy set is often apparent from his props and appearance. He invokes the griot tradition from his home country, Senegal, by often coming on stage first in African attire, a beaded crown, necklace, and a talking drum. African royalty on stage may be the apt framing of Diouf. Some of his audience may find this amusing, no different from the way some members of the elite class during the Carnival found the dress-up of the peasants funny. The laughter of the elite usually reverberates on the sight of the poor peasants until the performances begin and the poor turn the jokes onto the elite in a clear case of subversion with humour (Bakhtin 1968, 203). Diouf does more than mere subversion though. In transplanting his cultural heritage to the Canadian stage, Diouf brings the cultural memory of his homeland as a mediator of the comedic conversation that is about to occur. It creates an instant community with Africans in the audience and invites non-Africans into the conversation as the performative conversation. The audience is invited to be the "crab," the one who helps the African and is imbued with the ability to look past the "clothes" or outer covering of the immigrant.

However, the joke switches in the performance when Diouf ditches the African attire and dons denim shirt and trousers. Is he abandoning his African roots so quickly? He answers:

> "My placenta is buried in Africa and it keeps calling me back. But that Boucar is no longer here. This is a new Boucar, a true Quebecer. This Boucar was born in Rimouski (Quebec). The Senegalese Boucar is no longer here. I can see many of you surprised but that is true. Even my son is confused. This show was conceived because of a question he asked me. He came to me one day after I disciplined him and asked me to go back to where I came from. I told him 'You know Anthony, it is not fair. I have lived here for 25 years and you have only lived here for 6 years, which is your entire life, why do you think you are more Quebecer than me? I am from here because I have stayed here for 25 years and that is longer than you have been alive. You go back to where you came from.' My son's eye grew wide and teary, as he begged. "Please papa, don't send

> me back." Then he suddenly stopped crying and said, 'where did I and other babies come from?" (For an X or Y reason, 2017)

Beyond the invocation of his African roots and the strong allusion to the family, Boucar's joke is one that places the immigrant experience in perspective. He has worked hard for more than 25 years in Quebec and his belonging is questioned by none other than his six- year-old son. Rather than be offended, Boucar's humour defuses the tension and helps him channel the rage into laughter that turns the joke on his son. By comparing the number of years that they have stayed on the land and then illogically asking his son to go back to where he came from (the womb), Diouf establishes a relationship with the land that affirms his belonging.[2] The land has been his home for longer than his home country and so he states that the denim-wearing Boucar, as opposed to the traditional African attire-wearing Boucar, was born in Rimouski, Quebec.

I find it fascinating that in his rebuttal of the denial of his right to the space he occupies, he neither called on race, family hierarchy (father to son) or social standing to affirm his belonging. Rather, humour became the tool that firmly integrates him without the use of violence. In doing so, Diuof buys into the conclusions of Elaine Scarry (1985) and Sussie Lindfield (2010).

The human body has been described by Elaine Scarry (1985, 12) as the "original site of reality" since the human functions of the body are one and the same for all humans. She further states that "what is remembered in the body is well remembered" (Ibid). Sussie Lindfield (2010) agrees with this notion and goes on to state that the body is "our primary truth" (5). As a scientist, with a bias for biology, Diouf echoes the conclusions of both scholars and uses the body as the unifying factor in bringing the immigrant and the host together in conversation; their bodily functions are one and the same. And he reminds them of this with another joke:

> "If you think you are too small to change anything, try sleeping in a tent with a Mosquito [Pause] The Dalai Lama said that, not my grandfather. My grandfather is more poetic than that. My grandfather would say 'it is when a mosquito lands on a man's testicles that he realizes all problems cannot be solved with violence towards a lesser being." (Audience applauds).

Diouf's audience consists of both white Canadians and African immigrants and he wants them all to embrace the immigrant – signified by the seemingly helpless and bothersome pest, mosquito – and so he uses the most sensitive part of the male body, the testicles to show that the immigrant and immigration are sensitive subjects that cannot be solved by violence. As every male also share testicles, he definitely touched a raw nerve, which speaks truth to the audience irrespective of their cultural or ethnic background. More like a call to engage in less aggressive forms of relationships in their interactions with the immigrant as they may end up, like any man who goes ahead and crush a mosquito on his testicles, hurting themselves more than the immigrant.

There is also the ironic contrast of culture. He contrasts how the Dalai Lama would tell the joke to how his grandfather would tell it and concludes that his grandfather is more poetic. Obviously, he is biased but with good reason. This is a reference to the folktale tradition of Africa that embraces the drum and song as part of storytelling art (Okpewho 1992, Finnegan 1970). As if to further his allusion to the body and its relationship to both the Dalai Lama and Africa, he got the audience involved in a call and response style song:

> **Boucar**: The Habit does not make the Monk

[2] Indeed the idea of one's placenta being buried in Africa is part of a traditional cultural ritual in most parts of the African continent. It represents the strongest ties to one's natal roots.

**Audience**: But it hides the monk's box

The call and response folksong style is present amongst the Ashanti people of Ghana as part of the narrative humour contest, *Opo*, used as a satirical rebuke of the ruling class. But outside of cultural memory, the body as the site of truth (Scarry 1985, 12-13) is used in the joke. Everyone is the same under the cloth and while the habit may not make a monk, it covers his nudity. The immigrant may not be seen as part of the society but performs a very important part. A naked Dalai Lama will be nothing to look at. Therefore, while his cloak, or habit may not make him a monk, it is a necessary part of what makes him a monk. Immigrants and immigration are an integral part of the society and must be accepted as such.

Diouf has used his comedy as a force for integration and the promotion of harmonious coexistence, both within immigrant communities, and Canadian society at-large. However, the humour of Diouf also deliberately connects immigrants with other marginalized groups. He especially succeeds in deliberately letting his humour interact with members of the First Nations in Canada. An affirmation of his fluid identity, one that easily changes from Senegalese to Canadian, which he reinforces on stage using humour.

One of his stand-up performance set is entitled "Magtogoek." Diouf explains that it is an Algonquin word that was the original name for the St. Lawrence River.

> "Magtogoek, the river is the main artery of Quebec, of Canada. If the artery dies, the man dies. We must protect our artery (marine life and water) to keep living as a nation. You know that there is fish in the river (St. Lawrence) called Beluga. It is a native Whale and it remains in the river. Other Whales and Dolphin migrate during the winter, but the Beluga never leaves. We need to cherish the Magtogoek. Maybe when we realise that water is the bitcoin of the future, we will take it serious[ly]."

Once again, we see the reference to the body in his symbolic use of the river as the artery that powers the country. He then uses a fish in the river, the Beluga, to represent resistance by indigenous peoples to any attempt to make them leave their ancestral lands. The immigrant shares some of this resistance, like the Whale that comes to share the river with the Beluga, and the Beluga is happy to share.

It should be recalled that the second function of stand-up comedy is humorous social commentary (Double 2005). Diouf decides to present commentary on environmental issues, which does not distinguish between citizens and immigrants, but affects everyone. His space, the harmonious habitat everyone shares, is being threatened by capitalist elements, the same elements that threaten immigrant integration strategies and he urges resistance against it, "before water is turned into a crypto currency, bitcoin."

Diouf combines science with humour in ways that work for him to achieve that harmonious relationship with his living ground and the people on it. As he had said, "humour allows him to still use his science, in ways that science did not allow him to use humour." Humour has social significance, one that fosters unity and he is making the best use of it. Humour has become his passport, one that allows him to perform any identity that he so desires without recourse to explanation. Little wonder that currently, Dr. Diouf sits on many immigration and settlement committees in Quebec, a testament to the power of stand-up comedy.

# Speaking up as resistance: The comedy of Arthur Simeon

Born in Uganda in 1984, Arthur Simeon moved to Canada as a teenager. His quest for the Canadian dream of peace, order and good governance meant he had to try his hand at several menial jobs before settling on comedy his vehicle of choice to facilitate integration into Canadian society. He first performed at a comedy club in Toronto, *Yuk Yuk's*, and after establishing himself as a performer of note, Simeon was invited as an English-speaking comedian to perform at *Just for Laughs* Comedy Festival in 2010. He cemented his position as a leading immigrant-Canadian comedian when he was invited the following year to headline a *Just For Laugh*s event in Halifax, Nova Scotia tagged *Funny as Hell*.

Unlike Boucar Diouf, Simeon's humour is more subversive, indeed, darker and more aggressive both in form and content. He is never afraid to take up elements of social inequality that he sees in the Canadian landscape and then use his jokes as resistance to widely held misconceptions and stereotypes about immigrants. His comedy sketch dwells more on the oppositional scripts of what the hosts imagine of the immigrant and what he knows to be the truth as an immigrant and yet, not transgressing to the point of deportation. Our examples are drawn from his performances at Yuk Yuk's in 2007 and *Just For Laughs* in 2017. Spreading our data over a decade helps confirm that the tone of the message has not changed despite the passage of time and reaffirms the need to constantly resist all forms of hegemony in Canada.

At the 2007 performance, Arthur Simeon takes on the widely held, even if unsubstantiated view that the Canadian government spends more on Africa than its own citizens at home, especially war veterans (Zilio 2016) with his introduction:

> Hello, my name is Arthur Simeon and yes I am an African, born and raised in Kampala, Uganda. And no, I am not the kid you have sponsored for the past 50 years, I am also looking for that kid.

He then goes on to tackle more stereotypes:

> I am happy to be in Canada although I must confess some of you ask stupid questions, not all of you, but some of you. The other day a girl walked up to me and asked 'so why are you here' and I replied "a bunch of you folks took my ancestors about 200 years ago and they never came back and so I came to join them, I just felt eh! There is something good going on up there.

Here, the "mimicry to mockery", that Bhabha (1994) highlights as being necessary for a subjugated human to perform the "ambivalent" identity required to subvert the power structure (87) is demonstrated by Simeon. Whoever asked the question was in the position of power, probably a white resident of Canada, and most like someone unhappy with Simeon's presence in Canada.

Rather than take offence, Simeon inserts himself into the entire history of Canada by drawing on the transatlantic slave trade to justify his presence. In so doing, he subverts the power narrative and resists any attempt to make him feel unwelcomed or as though he does not belong in Canada. However, he cushions the blow of his mockery, padding his transgression so as not to cause offence by adding: "I felt eh!, there is something good going on there."

By adopting the folksy Canadian expressive, "eh!", after every sentence he culturally positions himself as a "true" Canadian who belongs and not just as an immigrant. If the slaves are yet to return—and they never will—then he might as well come see what is good that is keeping them in Canada. Following Rick Ross (2006),

Simeon, "laughed back at the empire" and its representative by blaming them for the transatlantic slave trade and as such being responsible for his presence as an immigrant. He also, in that sentence, effectively ties the entire slave trade to the colonial process by invoking the ancestry of his questioner to that of his experience. He inverted the question into a social commentary of why his presence need not bother anyone, yet remember, he already said the land is good.

Speaking further about his experience in Canada as an immigrant, Simeon tells the audience:

> Canada has the most beautiful women in the world because they are the most inquisitive in the world but guess what? I hate you. Why do you think I need to confirm your stereotype every time we meet? Is it true? Is it true you have animals in Africa? Yeah, like I will come out of my house to go to school and there will be this herd of elephants and zebras going by—well, let me help you. For every 'is it true question', the answer is 'it is'?

As an immigrant, is Arthur Simeon irritated that everyone wants to confirm their stories of stereotype? Perhaps not, however, he is using humour to buy back the dignity that he feels denied by the question. He even opens with a complimentary remark about Canadian women, whom he observes ask the most questions. The irony is that they are asking someone in Canada, seeking citizenship and performing all the legal requirements to attain that; someone trying to be Canadian or a new Canadian and yet the currency of his identity remains the country he comes from. From this irony comes the humour and comedy that Simeon now utilises to get his message across.

Sensing that some of his audience always generically labels every "Blackman" as "cool dude" he said:

> I guess you all thought I was a cool black dude until you heard me speak and you picked the accent. I mean, don't get me wrong, I also love black guys for their hip hop, D.J, rap and unemployment rate. However we Africans are the taxi drivers, the laundry men and the guys who hand out the freebies at Walmart, yep, that is the Africans.

It appears Simeon has made it his duty to break down stereotypes using the stand-up stage as his vehicle. Again, we see the stereotype that all Black people that are not involved in popular culture as rappers, musicians and DJ are unemployed. Now, he has extracted the African immigrant from that classification and points out the important work undertaken by African immigrants: "Taxi drivers", "Laundry men" and supermarket employees. No, he is not saying Africans are better than their fellow men, or other Black people. Rather he is using his medium, comedy, as a tool of resistance and protest, to draw attention to the often neglected roles immigrants play in society; something that often gets left out in right wing assaults on immigration. Simeon is direct and subversive and appears too eager to take on any misconception or stereotypes about his beloved homeland and continent. This is further demonstrated by the final joke that I want to consider in this section.

The final joke under consideration was performed by Simeon at the *Just For Laughs* Comedy Festival of 2017. This time, he takes on a booming industry that has been termed "voluntourism". It is a phenomenon whereby young volunteers from western countries go to developing countries as volunteers to help out with whatever perceived deficiencies the country may lack. However, it appears the social media generation also brought about those who are just going for the adventure and spend time snapping pictures and posting on social media rather than the actual volunteering that they said they were going to perform. Taking on the pride with which some of the volunteers speak condescendingly to immigrants from the country

they have just visited and by extension to the citizens of the country itself, Simeon narrates his experience:

> The toughest part of being an African is that everyone thinks that they are better than us. All of you think you are better than us. Yeah, the silence. Guess you are saying 'of course, everyone knows that. It's easy being better than those who come from Africa.' That's not true. Don't get me wrong, some of you are better than us but not all of you. Let me explain. I joined a group conversation the other day, a girl noticed my accent and said, 'where are you from' and I happily told her 'I was born and raised in Kampala, Uganda', to which she eagerly replied "wow, coincidentally I was in Uganda three weeks ago." And I asked her 'did you enjoy your visit to my lovely home country?' and she said, 'No, no, no, I wasn't there visiting, I was there helping out' (Pause). I was like, 'Did they call you or something or were you responding to some disaster 'cause I didn't see it on the news.' She replied, 'you don't understand, I work at Lulu Lemon at the mall and I took 3 weeks out to help out', [Changing his tone to a more serious one] Now, here is the thing, I grew up in Uganda and I understand the expertise we need in so many areas of life such as medicine, engineering, nursing, maybe even Urban Planning, but this girl works at Lulu Lemon *at the mall*. Who in Africa is looking for tight yoga expertise? (*Loud laughter from audience*). Listen, I have lived in Canada long enough to know that if you work at the mall and you are over the age of 21, then you are a failure. Sorry. Why are you taking your lack of ambition and mediocrity to a place that is already saturated with its own problems? Please stay in your basement apartment here and stay the hell away from my people" (*Loud laughter and applause*)

The joke does not in any way paint Uganda or Africa at-large as places without problems. The problems are acknowledged. Simeon is concerned with adding to the problem by contributing nothing in the form of unrequired labour and then using it as a reason to boast and feel superior. The girl "went to help out" in Uganda, but she could do with some help herself in finding gainful employment. While her occupation as a fitness instructor may be fine for Canada, it adds no value in Uganda. The needs of average Ugandans are totally different. She may have gone thinking she was volunteering and helping, but she was simply a tourist who added no significant value to the space. A "voluntourist".

Simeon's comedy may contain his anger, and his jokes may just be verbal assaults on social inequalities, but he is able to use the medium of humour to mask the anger while getting his point across to his audience. In doing so, he confirms Jose Esteban Munoz's (1999) declaration that "comedy does not exist independent of rage." It is up to the comedian to make his rage work as comedic material and help the audience make use of what they are hearing.

# Conclusion

Stand-up comedy sets out with one purpose: to make people laugh. African immigrants have found the medium to be a tool for social integration and resistance when necessary. They have found work in the genre and have used their presence in the artistic space as a means of galvanising themselves and their fellow immigrants to successfully navigate the challenges that lay on their path to belonging in Canadian society.

As Boucar Diouf and Arthur Simeon demonstrates, humour is a tool for speaking back to the centre from the margins, either in a subtle manner that encourages cohesion and harmonious relationship or through outright aggressive resistance. For these comedians, stand-up comedy opens up space for performing their identity as immigrants in negotiating belonging, resisting stereotypes and having a conversation using the medium of humour with diverse audiences. In the case of Boucar Diouf, stand-up comedy provides a tool to assert his fluid identity as African, Senegalese and Canadian, and to integrate with his new Quebec-home. As stated

above, it is his exploits on stage that has made him a member of so many respectable immigration councils in Quebec. Stand-up comedy has given him the tool to complicate discourses that stereotype immigrants while still working towards harmonious relationships between immigrants and their host communities.

And while Diouf has been able to use his humour to integrate and communicate with his diverse audience, Arthur Simeon has utilized stand-up as a tool for social awareness, integration and coping with the attendant problems of being a new arrival in a new country who must deal with preconceived stereotypes of what an immigrant should look like. However, I argue that Simeon's stand-up comedy does more; it constitutes a form of resistance to the widely held and often repeated—if unsubstantiated—image of the immigrant as a social liability.

And as they call upon humour as a form of resistance and communication, African comedians bring on stage a part of their cultural heritage; something that is available to them all year round and whenever they feel any form of subjugation. These oral traditions that give breathe to the performances of these comedians also dictates the manner and form of their jokes and while they have managed to show respect for their hosts, they still use humour to subvert the power structure and place themselves in a stronger position.

The famous words of the Marxist scholar, Antonio Gramsci (1971) rings true here. You cannot be subjugated without your consent. Using stand-up comedy, that consent is being denied by African immigrants to anyone who wants to dominate them as they negotiate their identity and belonging in Canada. Rather, like the spiders in my mother's proverb at the beginning of this article, they are upending power dynamics by speaking up with one voice and situating themselves at an advantageous position in discussions surrounding their rights in Canada. Even when oppressed, they refused to stay down. They are standing up on stage, talking back.

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## Appendix

# What Has Gender Got to Do with African Comedy and Stand-up Acts?

## Nduka Otiono

> Of all the paths to fame and equality in our less-than-fair culture, comedy seems to be among the more retrograde. Those hoary complaints that women aren't funny (yawn), that funny women aren't feminine enough (gag) and that men can't stand the implicit competition they feel from a woman with a sense of humor (I can't hear you) seem to me to be deaf, dumb and blind.
>
> — **Lisa Birnbach**, *"The comedians who broke the glass ceiling – and laughed"*

Humour may be universal but its retelling and retailing by professional comedians is gendered. While statistics based on authoritative empirical research may be unavailable on the number of male vis-à-vis female comedians in Africa, anecdotal evidence and conventional wisdom easily ratify the notion that there are far more professional male comedians than female comedians. While there is no reasonable body of research that analyses why the African comedy business is gendered—even when women tend to be the butt of jokes[1]—the reason for this representation is lopsided and not that difficult to comprehend.

Against the background of the drought of research on this subject, it is heartening to find Zoe Parker's robust essay, "Standing up for the nation: An investigation of stand-up comedy in South Africa post-1994 with specific reference to women's power and the body" (2002). Equally exciting, Shawn Levy's *In On the Joke: The Original Queens of Stand-up Comedy* (2022), profiles nine of stand-up comedy's pioneering women, "who overcame barriers and shattered glass ceilings to pave the way for many recognizable women in comedy today" (CBC Radio 2022). Prominent among the women is Jackie "Moms" Mabley, the Black ex-vaudevillian, and the subject of Whoopi Goldberg's celebrated HBO documentary, "Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley" (2013).

[1] The new book edited by Ignatius Chukwuma, *Sexual Humour in Africa: Gender, Jokes, and Societal Change* (2022), easily establishes the disproportionate extent to which women are the butt of jokes in Africa's comedic routines often performed by men. It is pertinent as well to recall the widely reported "rape joke" controversy that the Nigerian stand-up comic, Basketmouth was embroiled in in 2014, and which Nwankwo (2022a) explores.

In her essay, Parker echoes the oft-cited literary critic Reginald Horace Blythe in adducing reasons why there are so few women stand-up comedians. The reasons presented include a) the old psychoanalytical assumption that women have no sense of humour, and that "humour is a masculine 'trait'" (11); and b) the idea that women, in Blythe's words, are the "unlaughing at which men laugh" and which Parker rightly interprets as positing "women not only as objects of the 'male gaze' but of the male laugh" (13). These are the stereotypical views of women's engagement with comedy which Misty G. Anderson (2002) tackles from a literary perspective in *Female Playwrights and Eighteenth-Century Comedy: Negotiating Marriage on the London Stage* (2002). Anderson deconstructs the prejudicial theorizing on women and comedy by the English playwright and poet, William Congreve. Drawing from a letter titled "Concerning Humour in Comedy", Anderson derisively quotes Congreve: "methinks something should be observed of the Humour of the Fair Sex…Perhaps Passions are too powerful in that Sex, to let Humour have its Course; or may be by reason of their Natural Coldness. Humour cannot exert itself to the extravagant Degree, which it often does in our Male Sex." (22).[2] Further illuminating the discrimination against women's engagement with comedy which Parker illustrates in the South African context in her aforementioned essay. Anderson then cynically paraphrases Congreve's conjecture, noting that "The lack of humour in women comes from some essential difference between men and women" and that "women fall out of the register of humour, just as they tend to be disqualified as valid jokers in most comic theory" (22). Needless to add, there is no inherent (biological) difference between men and women that influences who becomes a comedian.

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The studies by Levy, Anderson, and Parker referenced above generally shed light on the sexism that underpins women's victimhood in the content and discourses on comedy, the numerical gap between African male and female comedians, as well as the bias in their professional trajectory. Specifically focusing on the South African experience, Parker further addresses the shortage of women stand-up comedians after 1994 while exploring the connection between this scarcity and "women's power and the body" (8). The essay also "questions the dominant white male discourse that operates within stand-up comedy in South Africa whilst emphasizing the need for alternative discourses to be voiced" (Ibid.). Parker's article further draws from the theoretical perspectives of the historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault, on resistance to make a case for "how women in stand-up comedy might challenge and subvert patriarchy" (Ibid.). She charges that, "if stand-up comedy is to realise its potential as an inclusive and democratic performance form, women comedians must begin to stand up, speak out and laugh in 'good conscience'" (11).

Besides the focus on South Africa in Parker's essay, Nigeria and Egypt are the other African countries that feature prominently in discourses on the African stand-up comedy and gender. This much is evident from two of the essays published in one of the most notable recent collections of essays on African stand-up comedy, *Stand-Up Comedy in Africa: Humour in Popular Languages and Media* edited by Izuu Nwankwo (2022b). The following three excerpts from the book offer insights in relation to the focus of this Appendix:

1. "Even with the advances made in both Egypt and Nigeria since the emergence of professional stand-up acts, women continue to be the subject of jokes but hardly the ones behind the microphone." (Okadigwe and El Sawy, 2022: 109)
2. "Female comics in Nigeria and Egypt perform under repressive and unfavourable circumstances. For this purpose, [they] perform to audiences accustomed to male-centric jokes and structures that are less tolerant of female perspectives." (Okadigwe and El Sawy, 2022: 112)
3. "The near absence of women on the African stand-up stage is evident in Egypt and Nigeria, where more than 97% of performers are male [more than 95% are male in Egypt, according to Okadigwe

[2] For more on this, see Congreve's original letter at https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A65151.0001.001/1:13.21?rgn=div2;view=fulltext

and El Sawy, 2022: 110]. In both nations, the conditions of becoming and sustaining a career injoke-telling are easier for men" (Nwankwo 2022c: 25).

Although these percentages may not be empirically demonstrated, without question they point to the significant marginalization of women in the industry.[3] It is partly for this reason that Lisa Birnbach, in the epigraph to this Appendix above, fires her excoriation of "our less-than-fair culture" in which "comedy seems to be among the more retrograde" (n.p.). It is for the same reason, too, that I raised issues pertaining to gender in interviews I had with leading African female comedians. But even then, it should be mentioned that some African female comedians acknowledge the support of their male colleagues in coping with professional challenges. For example, Nigeria's pioneer female comedian, Mandy Uzonitsha, declares in her interview with the author of this article that:

> When I came on board even the likes of Alibaba were trying to position and brand their names. I was all alone learning and making my mistakes and progress on stage. But the second female comedienne, Najita Dede, had Patrick Doyle to direct her. Also, Princess had Tee A; Lepacious Bose had Owen G; Ebinyo had Mc Shaggi. Also, I noticed that in Uganda, the first female comedienne Cotilda [Inapo] and Anne Kansiime had Salvador [Patrick Idringi] and Pablo [Kenneth Kimuli Amooti] helping them. (2016, n.p)[1]

Notwithstanding such masculine mentoring which Inapo also acknowledged in an interview with the Ugandan *Monitor* (March 17, 2011 [updated on January 07, 2021], the gravity of the gender imbalance and bias in the African stand-up comedy industry is further foregrounded by a news story on the twelfth edition of the popular Jive Cape Town Funny Festival at the Baxter Theatre in 2016. Captioned "Are women just not funny enough?" and written by Sarah Koopman (2016) for the *Maile&Guardian* of South Africa, the report emphasized that "the lack of representation of women in the 2016 instalment cannot be overlooked" (n.p.) even though the previous year's edition had featured two female comics, Tumi Morake and Tracy Klass. But, without necessarily setting out to produce a book like Shawn Levy's which has been hailed by *Publisher's Weekly* as "[A] riveting cultural history of women's stand-up comedy between WWII and the 1970s," the generic question I put to each of the female stand-up comics with slight variations was: "From your personal experience, what has gender got to do with African comedy and stand-up acts? How does gender influence the cultural economy of stand-up comedy in Africa—the number of comediennes, professional fees, and the kind of repertoire available to female/male comedians?" [5]

The following are the relevant excerpts from their responses, with a concise profile added for better identification of the comediennes.

# Tracy Klass (South Africa)

Tracy Klass has been described as the "premier South African funny lady […] known for her 'growing up disgracefully' stance on life." [6] She has also been labeled "one of Cape Town's female comedy stars" [7] (Channel 24, 2016: n.p.). She is a White South African of Jewish origin who went to her local Jewish Day School for primary school, then attended the Ellerslie Girls School in Sea Point. She remembers being sent by her mother to speech

[3] The point being made here may appear self-evident in any patriarchal society, but there cannot be any overemphasizing it because the geographic difference is crucial as there is, in fact, no uniformity in patriarchy and masculinity across geographies, cultures, race, age, and demographics.

[4] Remarkably, in 2016, both notable Ugandan stand-up comedians—Pablo and Salvador—were nominated for the world's funniest person competition launched by Laugh Factory to promote world peace through jokes and laughter. "Salvador and Pablo [were] among the 88 comics from 56 countries across the globe for the coveted title" (Manishimwe 2016, n.p.).

[5] The interviews were conducted via email. The female comedians selected here are pioneers in their own right.

[6] See "Wednesday Comedy Night at HQ." Retrieved from http://trendsoiree.weebly.com/entertainment/category/tracy-klass

[7] See "We had a quick chat with one of Cape Town's female comedy stars." Retrieved from https://www.news24.com/channel/we-had-a-quickie-with-one-of-cape-towns-female-comedy-stars-20160805

and drama lessons as soon as she was able to read. "I continued this as an extracurricular activity until my mid-20s and passed the Trinity College of London Licentiate exams and also passed English II through UNISA [University of South Africa]," she told me in a personal interview from which the excerpt below is taken. She worked in advertising for eight years, went to live in London for two years and returned to South Africa in the early 1990s. Around March 1999 while in Cape Town she saw an article, "Do you think you are funny?" which, according to her, kicked off the comedy circuit in Cape Town and launched the CCC—Cape Comedy Collective —run by Mark Sampson and Sam Pearce. "I had just returned to Cape Town after an 18-year absence with three kids and was getting my shattered life back on track when I saw this article," she told me, adding: "I had been told by friends that I was a funny person and I thought; well let me give this a go." The rest is history, to use that hackneyed expression. In July 2011, Klass staged her debut full-length stand-up show, "Klass Struggle", which she discusses in the excerpt below. A piece in the *Afternoon Express* states that Klass "co-starred in two full length shows with fellow comedienne Mel Jones – 'Doing it for the Money' and the sequel at Grand West's Roxy Revue Bar, 'Still Doing It'."[8] The piece concludes that, "[a]s one of the few female stand-ups in South Africa, Tracy takes an irreverent look at what women find funny—themselves" (Ibid.). Klass has performed in some of the most prestigious comedy venues, shows, and festivals in South Africa, especially in Cape Town.

More recently, along with other stand-up comics Kate Pinchuck, Kurt Schoonraad, Tracy Klass has starred as Bella Bam in the 2021 TV series mockumentary, *Tali's Baby Diary,* a sequel to the first-ever Showmax Original, *Tali's Wedding Diary.*[9] During the pandemic lockdown in February 2021 Klass launched her home business, " A Taste of Klass: traditional Jewish food home cooked by a Jewish mother, for delivery or collection" (Coleman 2021, n.p.).[10] That was after taking " voluntary retrenchment in 2020 from her position as marketing manager at Herzlia" (Ibid.). But notwithstanding her new business ventures, Coleman adds that "Klass is not letting the performance side of things slide though. She's very excited to have shot what she calls 'a little' pilot called *Come Fress With Me*" (Ibid).

## The Excerpt

**From your personal experience, what has gender got to do with African comedy and stand-up acts? How does gender influence the cultural economy of stand comedy in Africa, the number of female comedians, professional fees, and the kind of repertoire available to female/male comedians?**

African comedy is very, very diverse. There are definitely cultural groups that do not appreciate women mouthing off about anything. We are supposed to be barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen, pouring beer and if we are going to entertain, be dressed in a pretty frock singing! On the other hand, more sophisticated audiences love hearing comedy froma female perspective. One of the best bits of advice I received was remember, 50% of the audience are women, and they want to hear what you have to say. Men who are comfortable with themselves and appreciate women, love hearing what makes us tick. A woman on the line-up adds [a] diversity of material. I don't, however, have time for foul mouthed women or men. It is my pet peeve when a woman tries to be dirty and disgusting; there is no reason for it.

I think it is very difficult for woman to be a successful stand-up and run a family. A true example of this is Tumi Morake, married with three small kids. I think she is absolutely amazing and super organized. Mel Jones is a single mother. None of us could do this

[8] Tracy Klass (afternoonexpress.co.za)
[9] See article by SA People Contributor published online by *SA People News* at https://www.sapeople.com/2020/11/17/watch-long-awaited-sequel-talis-baby-diary-begins-filming-in-cape-town/
[10] See https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-05-21-comedian-tracy-klasss-jewish-home-cooking-just-the-way-bubbe-made-it/

without an exceptional support system. We just cannot leave our kids for days on end the way men can. This has a very direct impact on the number of females on the entertainment circuit *per se*. Once you have a family you cannot just hit the road. I don't believe that there is a difference in the fees paid to men and woman. There is a budget for entertainment and you either fit into it or not. When we do ensemble shows, everyone is paid the same.

Insofar as stage time availability—yes, there chauvinism rears its ugly head on many an occasion. I have said it before, women have to prove they are funny; men have to prove they are not! Men can get away with so much more, a woman has to endear herself to the audience before she can be bitchy—you see this in dealing with drunk hecklers all the time.I have never heard an audience shout at a man, "show us your d**k?", but female colleagues and I have been subjected to the "show us your t*ts"….

My performance is gender-based; all women relate to it. Kids relate to it 'cause they see their mother, and husbands realize that actually, my wife is not the only one that thinks, feels, sees things that way. Here is someone on stage articulating what women think and feel about issues: kids, clothing, aging, trying to keep current, *technology*—in every shape and form, *weight*, and of course, *first world problems in a Third world continent*.

**Do you have any major pragmatic strategy you use to involve the audience at your stage shows to create interactional contexts for the production and consumption of humour? Why was your 2011 *Klass Struggle* a success?**

The audience determines the strategy. Hosting a show is hard work: It is your job to find out the kind of audience; where the guests come from; whether they are foreigners; their occupation; and so on in order to feed the comics. Are they listening or do they want to be involved? Sometimes you get listening audiences, quiet laughers. You just see big smiles and sometimes shoulders shaking and then huge applause at the end. You have to just run with this because they are there to listen and don't want to be part of the show.

Also, you need to be careful with too much interaction with someone in the front because you end up excluding more than 80% of the room when you indulge in too much conversation. However, where there are diverse and interesting cultures and jobs in the room, you use that to feed your comedy. For example, if you are talking to a group of women and most of them are parents it is great to do your set on kids, schooling and lift schemes. Should the room be filled with mixed age ranges and interests you don't just talk about your kids, it just becomes boring, so you use the room to determine what their interests are so that you play off each other. As they say in comedy, the more you give the more you get. The audience feeds your energy, so you need to feed them the right level and interest.

*Klass Struggle* contextualized so many challenges that a single woman has to face. I laughed at the issues women face and those that mothers face. Yes, I know they are first world problems, but you still have to deal with them on a daily basis and they are tiresome and you are juggling so many balls—mother, marketing manager, comic, parent, sister. So, it was good to let everyone know that we are all in the same boat.

# Anne Kansiime (Uganda)

One of the most interesting introductions to Anne Kansiime is by the Ugandan comedian herself. Asked to tell a *Solutions4Africa* reporter about herself, Kansiime said: "I'm an open book, not as rude and scary as the Kansiime in the clips. Anyone who watches my clips knows that I'm married. I'm a local woman from Uganda from Mparokitaka in Western Uganda […] I have a degree in […] Sociology although I wanted to do music, dance, and drama at the university, but my parents wouldn't have me do that. I don't really see myself

as a comedian but as an entertainer."[11] Although Kansiime may not see herself as a "comedian," the title is fitting as she is indeed a *comedian*, the art and career upon which her reputation as Africa's Queen of Comedy rest. While at Makerere University she cut her teeth in acting with the theatre group, Theatre Factory. Interestingly, she did not formally launch a career performing and touring as a stand-up comedian until after graduation. The collapse of the Theatre Factory spurred Kansiime to join another creative group, Fun Factory, and later the *MiniBuzz* series. She soon ventured into recording skits and postingon her YouTube channel. As she reveals in "The making of Kansiime Anne Chapter 5," her real break came via Kenya's Citizen TV with "Don't mess with Kansiime," which was also broadcast on NTV in Uganda. She hit her peak between 2014 and 2016 when her skits not only garnered millions of views and subscribers online but earned her numerous high-profile continental and international awards. Among these awards were: the YouTube Silver Play Button; Comedy YouTube Sub-Saharan Africa Creator Award; Outstanding Female Comedian; African Entertainment Awards USA Best Comedian's Award; Lagos International Festival 2013 (Best Actress) Winner; Social Media Awards (Favorite Celebrity) winner; and Honorary recognition by the SIIKETV Rising Star Academy Awards as the "Queen of Comedy"[12]

As Lynda Gichanda Spencer writes, "[i]t is evident that Kansiime's presence on new and social media has led to various spin-offs for her brand of humor that articulates a particular African experience rooted in a local Ugandan context." [13] The "spinoffs" include a music album of children's songs and singles,[14] the Kansiime Anne series on YouTube, and the television series, *Don't Mess With Kansiime* and *Girl From Mparo*. She has also appeared in advertising commercials, being named brand ambassador for corporations that include Old Mutual in Kenya. Besides her spectacular run with "Don't Mess with Kansiime", keeping up with a busy local and international stand-up comedy performance tour calendar while working with fellow comedienne and partner Cotilda Inapo as head of her creative writing and production team, Kansiime has remained committed to "always trying to keep [her] ninjas entertained without losing [her]self in the process" (Personal interview 2016, n.p.). She adds: "I've been blessed that Cotilda [Inapo] and my whole creative team share that same vision."[15] Remarkably, Kansiime has extended her blessing to charity as captured in The Kansiime Foundation Documentary 2017.[16]

## The Excerpt

**You are one of the pioneering stand-up comediennes in Uganda and one of Africa's prominent comedians with an international profile. From your personal experience, what has gender got to do with African comedy and stand-up acts?**

Gender is a course at many universities so it should tell you that it is taken seriously which is good. But when it comes to the ladies, the only problem we have is thinking being a lady is a problem. Yet, the way we should see it is simply as a great source of content for African comedy and stand-up acts as a whole.

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[11] See www.solutions4africa, "Inspirational African Women: Anne Kansiime." Retrieved from http://www.solutions4africa.com/index.php/news-publisher/483-inspirational-african-women-anne-kansiime [12] For more her awards see the *Wikipedia* page on her at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Kansiime

[13] Unpublished research paper titled "Don't mess with Kansiime": The cultural economy of transgressive (female/feminist) humour in Uganda."

[14] The singles include five songs featured at https://www.howwebiz.ug/AnneKansiime/album/379/anne-kansiime-singles. In 2020 she released "Kansiime Kidz disco Collection 2020"—see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8B6CRp3Aa0

[15] Personal interview with Nduka Otiono, November 2016. Cotilda left the team in 2018.

[16] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Emow3fsdWU

**How does gender influence the cultural economy of stand-up comedy in Africa--the number of female comedians, professional fees, and the kind of repertoire available to female/male comedians?**

I say simply work hard, and with God on your side, all the things you have mentioned will not be even considered when paying you because money has no gender.

**In one of the essays submitted for consideration for this special issue of the journal on stand-up comedy in Africa, a scholar states your approach to the gender question thus: "She [Anne Kansiime] always portrays women in unconventional gender roles. Her female characters are not passive and submissive. Instead, she depicts strong women who refuse to show any deference to hegemonic structures." Additionally, in an interview you declared that: "most of my clips speak for most shy women around the world who would actually want to say the things that I say but are unable to, so it doesn't matter how African it is, people can relate." Did you set out in a programmatic way to deal with issues of gender in Africa through comedy**?

Not at all. I was simply sharing life as it is, and the gender issue kept showing up because it is part of life.

**In your cultural pride of being "just a local comedian" who promotes the maxim " going back to our roots" you have called African people to " let's be ourselves, let's own our 'Africanness' because […] if we all start being proud of who we are, the Kim Kardashians of the world will be out of business." [17] This statement makes one think you might be familiar with the work of Okot p'Bitek, the great Ugandan writer and author of *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* who lived in Nigeria for a while. Are there ways you see yourself as a "neo-oral performer" (influenced by the Acholi oral tradition or folklore and folklife), and the comic personas you create as Lawino's granddaughters—as a scholar has interpreted your work? I am particularly thinking here of your skit: "Kansiime Anne in Acholi Love on minibuzz" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beoNTnWDCPQ)**

Eh, eh, eh...I am a risk-taker but I will not risk messing with a legend's work but don't lose hope...I have some Acholi experience being that I am married to a very handsome Ojok, and every once in a while, I joke about our life and that is as Acholi as possible.[18]

**In his book, *Road Trip Rwanda: A Journey into the New Heart of Africa,* Will Ferguson notes that "Ugandan comedian Anne Kansiime opened a recent show in Kigali by saying, "You know, back home in Uganda I'm actually very beautiful—and surprisingly tall. Here, it is a different story'." How culturally specific is stand-up comedy, and how do you adjust to performing for international audiences and performing at home?**

Simply do what they say, "When in Rome..." Basically relate with their life and the rest gets easier.

[17] See "Inspirational African Women: Anne Kansiime." Retrieved from http://www.solutions4africa.com/index.php/news-publisher/483-inspirational-african-women-anne-kansiime

[18] The marriage to Gerald Ojok broke up in 2017 and Kansiime got into another relationship with Kantu Skylanta, a musicianwith whom she has a son born in April 2021.

**How do you combine your artistic enterprise with being a wife and a brand ambassador?**

The same way every other woman does around the world. There is time for everything. Of course, sometimes, the funny Kansiime mixes with the brand ambassador and wife but only for good.

**What are your best memories and greatest challenges as a comedian, especially regarding sustaining *Don't Mess with Kansiime* as a television show on Maisha Magic Channel 161, keeping up with a busy local and international performance calendar, and working with fellow comedian and partner, Cotilda Inapo, as head of your creative writing and production team?**

Simple...always trying to keep my ninjas entertained without losing myself in the process. I have been blessed that Cotilda and my whole creative team share that same vision.

**Is it difficult for women to work together contrary to [all too often] controversial thinking about women being women's worst enemies?**
Enemies come in all shapes and sizes; some people even have insect enemies. So, whether or not women are each other's worst enemy, I choose not to think about it because I have been blessed to be able to work with many great women and I am not complaining.

# Mandy Uzonitsha (Nigeria)

Mandy Uzonitsha is arguably Nigeria's pioneer professional female stand-up comedian, and she wastes no time in sharing her story. "I am proud of my journey being the first in a man's world, breaking that glass ceiling makes me feel like I'm on top of the world," she says, adding: "Opa Williams is one person associated with stand-up comedy in Nigeria with his brand, *Night of a Thousand Laughs*. This is a household name when it comes to comedy shows in Nigeria. So, you can imagine my joy when he included me in his first-ever *Night of a Thousand Laughs* tour around Africa."

Born to parents from Delta State, where Warri, the unofficial headquarters of Nigeria's stand-up comedy and comedians is located, Mandy holds a Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree in Political Science from Nnamdi Azikiwe University. However, she did not need the degree to venture into her natural turf, comedy. Mandy recalls the very beginning when she first appeared on The Charly Boy Show, a 1990s television variety show series with music, social commentary and comedy segments, and produced by the maverick artist, Charles Oputa.[19] Soon after premiering for the gag segment Candid Camera, and later as Mama Nothing Spoil on The Charly Boy Show, Mandy starred at the first Girls Night Out comedy show at the high-profile Campagne Tropicana then at Ikeja, Lagos. As Olaniyi Tabi, U.S.-based addiction therapist and entertainment consultant hyperbolically writes, "[t]hat night was a watershed in the history of entertainment promotions in Nigeria, many of the heavy weights now in the industry were discovered" (n.p.).[20] Since then, Mandy has performed across Africa with notable stand-up comics such as Kagiso Lediga and Ndumiso Lindi from South Africa; David Oscar, David Aglah, and Funny Face, from Ghana. She has also performed alongside Uganda's foremost comedians Pablo and Salvador; Carl Ncube from Zimbabwe; Cotilda from Uganda; and Kenya's Churchill and Eric Omondi.

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[19] The show has recently been advertised on YouTube on May 19, 2022, as returning to the screen "soon". See "The Charly Boy Show is Back." YouTube. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qjxAiIyQpk. Also see "The Charly Boy Show returns with a bang," *Vanguard*, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/04/the-charly-boy-show-returns-with-a-bang/ April 27, 2021.
[20] See Olaniyi Tabi "About Super Mandy," *LinkedIn*, Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3u0nHgj

In recognition of her remarkable profile Mandy was awarded a prestigious City People Entertainment award on March 23, 2006. "It was important to me because, at that time, *City People* magazine was the A-Z in entertainment," recalls Mandy.[21] She has also been decorated with the Icons Award in 2021 by the Governor of her State, Delta State, Dr. Ifeanyi Okowa. About this award, Mandy said: "I really felt good about this award becauseI always felt that a prophet was never recognized at home." Other acts of recognition for her outstanding work include being featured on CNN's Inside Africa programme, "because of a joke I did on how they reported the news during the Hurricane Katrina." Mandy has also performed at a State Dinner in Aso Villa, the office and residence of the President of Nigeria, at the invitation of Mrs. Patience Jonathan, then First Lady of Nigeria. Mandy is, in her own words, "a proud single mum" whose "greatest joy and treasure" is her "18-year-old daughter, April Nwaokobia. She proudly notes that her daughter "wantsto be a neurosurgeon but […] loves to write and has three books on Webnovel online under her pen name, Apriljewel" (Ibid.). Reflecting on the negative experiences she has encountered as a female stand-up artist Mandy concludes: "I laugh off any insult to my gender. It did not stop me; I have a thick skin."

## The Excerpt

**Did the rise of Nollywood and popular sports such as football affect the rise of comedy in Africa? Did these two developments—respect for actors and footballers—encourage you in any way to go professional?**

Yes, Nollywood and our footballers set the stage for recognition of the act [professional comedy] internationally. But, for people like us, when we started, Nollywood was also budding, thus we grew together. We all had our difficulties, our setbacks, drawbacks, and reservations on how things will play out. But thank God, Nollywood is the third largest movie industry in the world.

As the first comedienne, I had close to nothing to sharpen my path. I was working blindly, making my mistakes and progress on stage. At that time, the only female that inspired me and was on the limelight was Mariam Babangida, our then First Lady; she had so much style and class that I just wanted to be like her.

**What was your inspiration as a comedian, especially in an industry dominated by men?**

What inspired me was the determination and motivation that I wanted to fill a gap. I wanted to motivate other women to come out and join me. I did not want to be both the first female stand-up comedian and the last. Believe me, I thought of quitting at a point; I was frustrated on many occasions but I was determined to keep going. My brother, I inspired myself!

**What has gender got to do with African comedy and stand-up acts?**

From my experience, comediennes in Africa are still not as widely known and appreciated like comediennes in other developed parts of the world. To me, only Ann Kansiime from Uganda has gotten to that level. In Africa, a woman's place is usually seen to be in the kitchen so sometimes people find it difficult to see her as a doctor, a pilot, or someone that stands and cracks jokes.

A lot of my challenges stem from the fact that I'm a woman, and you see, my gender made it very difficult to get jobs. The few jobs around, such as emceeing big events, are given to the men. Much later, they found out that some events like anchoring cooking or

[21] Personal communication with the author on WhatsApp, June 26, 2022.

hairstyle shows were tailored for a female comedienne. Thus, when I get those jobs, I use that platform to sell my brand.

Our culture is our draw-back. My mum will say a lady should be seen not heard. Most of the juicy jobs go to the male comedians. Way back, most parents will not allow their kids to play football till they found out that it's a big industry. Most kids in Africa now get soccer balls as birthday gift. Since most young men see that Ali Baba is wealthy, they rushed to join him, and today, the likes of Basketmouth and AY are millionaires. Lots of young, talented guys are joining the comedy industry in Nigeria and the rest of Africa. But since Mandy only has one small house in Lekki and Helen Paul has a school, our ladies are still finding it difficult to join us. But the case is different in Uganda where we have lots of female comedians.

When it comes to jokes, certain things a male comedian will say and people will roll on the ground and start laughing but take the same joke and let an African comedienne say it, she would have succeeded in killing her career. From my experience, this *divide* between comedians is only in the mind of the people that give us the jobs. No gender has the right to jokes. The first people to make us laugh in life are our mothers from all the faces and funny sounds they make when we cry as babies. Even some of the male comedians have also been instrumental to the growth of the comedienne.

Like I told you, when I came on board, even the likes of Ali Baba were trying to position and brand their names; I was all alone, learning and making my mistakes and progress on stage. But the second female comedienne, Najita Dede, had Patrick Doyle to direct her. Also, Princess had Tee A; Lepacious Bose had Owen G; Ebinyo had Mc Shaggi. Also, I noticed that in Uganda, the first female comedian, Cotilda and Ann Kansiime, had Salvado and Pablo helping them.

# Cotilda Inapo (Uganda)

Cotilda Inapo is a copywriter, broadcaster, events host, motivational speaker, and pioneer female stand-up comedian in Uganda**.** She was the only female member of Crackers Comedy group**,** Uganda's foremost comedy collective. According to Inapo, "Crackers Comedy Club was the official pioneer stand-up comedy platform in Uganda, holding weekly shows and airing as 'Mic Check' stand-up comedy show on NTV Uganda from 2009 to 2011."[22]

Inapo studied Computer Science at Makerere University, Kampala, but has gone onto establish a reputation as a leading social entrepreneur with a rich resume that makes herone of the most resourceful and widely experienced female comedians on the African continent. Among the enterprises she has championed is Queens of Comedy which she founded in 2013. She describes it as "The first all-female comedy platform in Uganda" which "discovers and nurtures female comics" (Ibid.). She has also served as a member of the Board of Directors of Comedy Files and contributed to the now defunct Laftaz Comedy group that operated as a comedians' collective and lounge, with incredible daily stand-up comedy shows in Kampala, capital of Uganda. Interestingly, while pursuing her own enterprise dreams, she served for four years as the Creative Director for Anne Kansiime's company, and "[l]ed a creative team of 5 talented individuals to develop content and drive Kansiime's digital brand across a variety of online platforms: website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube" (Ibid.).

Besides her engagement as a social entrepreneur associated with some of Uganda's best-known comedy brands, Inapo had been a broadcaster at Galaxy FM, Uganda's leading local language and English language urban youth radio station, where she hosted a breakfast show. Thrilled by her successes and those of her compatriots in humourpreneurship in Uganda, Inapo declared in response to a question by Christine

[22] See her LinkedIn page, https://www.linkedin.com/in/cotilda-inapo-874468b/

Wanjiru Wanjala in 2012: "Comedy is going places and we are right in the middle of it. Our stand-up is English, meaning it can cross borders. And as you have seen there are a lot of chances for comedians around Africa. I must say it's comedy's time. We are waiting with our suitcases packed." But that wait is only figuratively speaking, and her language of comedy is not only English but also the local Luganda language, between both of which she code-switches effortlessly in performance.

More recently, she has been busy on the stand-up comedy circuit in Uganda, delivering rib-cracking routines such as she did at the Arise Woman Comedy Jam 2022 with the theme: "Cotilda - The Power Of A Woman."[23] Understandably, then, asked whether she gets "intimidated by male comedians," Inapo responded: "Actually I don't because I think it's good that I get to compete with them and they help me improve. The male comedians have in fact been my mentors" (*Monitor* 2011 [2021]).

## The Excerpt

**Could you please briefly trace the history of stand-up comedy in Uganda? In what ways (if any) did any pioneers you may recall influence your involvement in the industry?**

Hmmm...I would say that stand-up comedy has been around for some time but in the beginning, it wasn't professionally done or labeled as stand-up someday until comedians like Pablo started performing regularly. One major landmark for stand-up comedy was the "Standup Uganda" competition that brought together raw stand-up comedy talent out of which the first professional stand-up comedy group "The Crackers" was formed and the rest is history.

**You were the only female member of Crackers Comedy group and one of the pioneering female stand-up comedians in Uganda. From your personal experience, what has gender got to do with African comedy and stand-up acts? How does gender influence the cultural economy of stand comedy in Africa--the number of comediennes, professional fees, and the kind of repertoire available to female/male comedians?**

In the beginning of course there was need to break ground for female comedians in Uganda and by that time we couldn't talk much about performance fees because none of us was that good but now we can clearly say that apart from the different perspectives we get on issues based on our gender, payment and the rest is based on how good one is.

**What are your best memories and greatest challenges as a comedienne especially regarding sustaining the Queens of Comedy Show which you founded, working at Laftaz Comedy group, and working with fellow comedienne and partner, Anne Kansiime?**

Queens of Comedy even now remains an amazing concept and like all good things there are challenges but we choose not to dwell on them, rather they make great learning experiences. As for working with Anne Kansiime, all I can say is that I am grateful to God for thus far He has brought us. She is extremely hardworking, talented, kind and beyond funny.

[23] See Akite Entertainment, "Cotilda - The Power Of A Woman: Arise Woman Comedy Jam 2022." YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUm_S-2Q5bM, 18 May 2022.

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## Book Review

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

**Ifesinachi Nwadike**, *Independent writer and scholar*

*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 ensured 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 theirs 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.