NOKOKO
Institute of African Studies
Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada)
2022 (10)

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.

---

[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

---

[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

---

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

[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]

******

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.

Acknowledgements

I would like to specially acknowledge the contributions of Chikezirim Nwoke towards writing this Introduction. I appreciate the preliminary support of my friends and colleagues, Ogaga Okuyade, Pius Adesanmi of blessed memory, as well as that of my daughter Kika Otiono, toward conceptualizing this special issue. To the contributors to this volume, I am grateful for their patience and commitment through the gestational period and metamorphosis of this special issue. I am indebted to Ebenezer Obadare, Emma Bider, Moradewun Adejunmobi, Bissy L. Waariyo, Tokunbo Ojo, Chukwuma Okoye, Luam Kidane, Uchechukwu Peter Umez, Pablo Idahosa, and Richard Raber, for their critical insights in the manuscripts review process. I appreciate the assistance of Godwin Okhawere as the research assistant who interviewed on my behalf some celebrated stand-up comedians for a larger project from which I have drawn insights here; I thank the comedians for their cooperation in granting the interviews. I am indebted to Ali Baba (Atunyota Alleluia Aporobomeeriere)—Nigeria's foremost stand-up comedian, a friend and compere at my wedding two and half decades ago—for enriching conversations about the origins, themes, and performance aesthetics of African stand-up comedy. And of course, without my supportive colleagues on the editorial board of *Nokoko,* the hard seeds of this project may not have borne fresh fruits.

[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.

References

Adamu, A.U. (2020). [Review of the book *Joke-Performance in Africa: Media, Mode and Meaning* ed. by Ignatius Chukwumah]. *African Studies Review 63*(2), E4-E6. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/760006.

Adejumobi, M. (2014). "Standup Comedy and the Ethics of Popular Performance in Nigeria." In *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday*. Eds. Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome. New York: Routledge. 175-194.

Adekunle, I. J. (2020). 'Stand-up comedy as contemporary live theatre'. J*ournal of Humanistic and Social Studies* 11(2/22), pp. 9-18.

Adeleke, D. A. 2005. Ethos of laughter among the Yoruba. *Ihafa: A Journal of African Studies*, 5 (2), 43-63.

_______________ . 2006. The Yoruba Fool paradigm. Oye: Ogun *Journal of Arts*. 7(45), 66.

_______________ . 2007. Parody of the Shakespearean Fool tradition in an African society. *Journal of social sciences* 15(1), 35-42.

Adesanmi, P. (2020). *Who owns the problem?: Africa and the struggle for agency*. Michigan State University Press.
Agwu, J. & Kan, T. (2013). *Jokes Apart: How Did I Get Here?* Lagos: Hot Coffee Books.

Ayakaroma, B.F. (2013). The Rise of Stand-up Comedy Genre in Nigeria: From Nothing to Something in Artistic Entertainment. Paper Presented at the Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists Annual Conference, Benue State University, Makurdi, 4-8 June. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/WhiteKitchenEntertainment/posts/the-rise-of-stand-up-comedy-genre-in-nigeriathe-rise-of-stand-up-comedy-genre-in/336482523662736/

Baba, Ali. Personal Interview. December 14, 2021.

Bakassi, O. Personal Interview. December 7, 2016.

_______________ . (2019). *The Memoirs of an African Comedian.* Lagos: Tribal Marks Media.

Bamidele, L. O. (2001). *Comedy: Essays & Studies*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers.

Barber, K. (2007). *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bauerlein, M. (2022). *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up: From Stupefied Youth to Dangerous Adults.* Regnery Gateway.

_______________ . (2009). *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don 't Trust Anyone Under 30).* Tarcher Perigee.

Bibbs R.R. (2019). The history of the clown stretches back to ancient Egypt. *The Herald Bulletin*, May 26, 2019. Retrieved from https://www.heraldbulletin.com/news/local_news/the-history-of-the-clown-stretches-back-to-ancient-egypt/article_07d777b0-9759-5e71-950b-c89cbfcbc71e.html

Brodie, I. (2014). *A Vulgar Art: A New Approach to Stand-Up Comedy*. The University of Mississippi Press.

Chukwudi-Okeh, Chinyere. (2021). "Locating Stand-Up Comedy in Nigeria as an Oral Performance Genre." Unpublished essay.

Chukwumah, I. (Ed.). (2018). *Joke-performance in Africa: Mode, Media and Meaning*. New York: Routledge.

Davidson, B. (1961). *Black Mother: The Years of the African Slave Trade*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.

Diakhaté, O., & Eyoh, H. N. (2017). The Roots of African Theatre, Ritual and Orality in the Precolonial Period. *Critical Stages: The IATC Journal*, (5) 1-9.

Filani, I. (2018). Dis laf fit kill person-An overview of Nigerian humour. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, *6*(4), 1-9.

Ford, N. (2021). How can Africa harness its soft power? *African Business*, Retrieved from https://african.business/2021/03/technology-information/the-new-face-of-african-collaboration/

Foster, D. H. & Bramley, A. (2016). How Alpine Yodeling Mutated into American Blackface Minstrelry: Vestiges of the Racist Entertainment Persist in Art and Politics. Retrieved from https://www.whatitmeanstobeamerican.org/identities/how-alpine-yodeling-mutated-into-american-blackface-minstrelry/

Gallagher, D. (2017). After Fleeing Civil War in Sudan, James Thiep Took an Unlikely Turn to Comedy. *Dallas Observer*. 13 February 2017. Retrieved from https://www.dallasobserver.com/arts/after-fleeing-civil-war-in-sudan-james-thiep-took-an-unlikely-turn-to-comedy-9173383

Grosvenor, E.S. & Toll, R.C. (2019). Blackface: The Sad History of Minstrel Shows, *American Heritage*, Winter 2019, Volume 64, Issue 1. Retrieved from https://www.americanheritage.com/blackface-sad-history-minstrel-shows

House of Ajebo. (12 January 2022). "Top 10 Tegwolo Videos Of 2021." Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsuDw09FEtw

Inapo. C. Personal Interview. November 25, 2016.

Jaffe, C. (14 September 2020). Building YouTube Shorts, a new way to watch & create on YouTube. Retrieved from https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/building-youtube-shorts/

Jones, R. (2016). People Are Using the "Damn Daniel" Meme to Sell White Vans on eBay. Retrieved from https://www.complex.com/sneakers/2016/02/damn-daniel-ebay

Journal of African Cultural Studies, (ahead-of-print). https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cjac20/current [Volume 34, 2022 - Issue 2].

Kahyana, D.S. (2022). The Afterlife of Ugandan Stand-up Comedy: Examining the Multiple Roles and Jocular Devices of Teacher Mpamire. *Stand-up Comedy in Africa: Humour in Popular Languages and Media*. Ed. Nwankwo, I. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag. 171-192.

Kansiimi, A. Personal Interview. November 25, 2016.

Klass, T. Personal Interview. November 2, 2016.

Kuiper, N.A., Grimshaw, C.L., & Kirsh, G. (2004). Humor is not always the best medicine: Specific components of sense of humor and psychological well-being. *17*(1-2), 135 - 168. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1515/humr.2004.002

Limb, P., & Olaniyan, T. (Eds.). (2018). *Taking African Cartoons Seriously: Politics, Satire, and Culture*. Michigan: MSU Press.

Mahar, W. (1991). Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts of Blackface Minstrelsy, 1840–1890. *Prospects, 16*, 241-279. doi:10.1017/S0361233300004543 Retrieved from https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/prospects/article/abs/ethiopian-skits-and-sketches-contents-and-contexts-of-blackface-minstrelsy-18401890/D9D57AA09BACB35B5749B4B5E5D1AF26

Martin, R. A., and Ford, T. (2018). *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach. Burlington*. MA: Elsevier Academic Press.

Mofe-Damijo. R. Personal Interview. October 28, 2016.

Music in Africa. (2015) *Creative Industries fuel global economy and provide 29.5 million jobs*. 7 December 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.musicinafrica.net/magazine/creative-industries-fuel-global-economy-and-provide-295-million-jobs?language=en>.

Noah, T. (2016). *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood.* New York: Random House Publishing Group.

Nwankwọ, I. (Ed.). (2022). *Stand-Up Comedy in Africa: Humour in Popular Languages and Media*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag.

_______________ . (2022). Old Wine in a New Bottle: Stand-up Comedy and its Dispersal across Africa. *Stand-up Comedy in Africa: Humour in Popular Languages and Media*. Ed. Nwankwo, I. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag. (11-44).

_______________ . (2022). *Yabbing and Wording: The artistry of Nigerian stand-up comedy.* NISC (Pty) Ltd.

______________ . (2019). Incongruous liaisons: Routes of humour, insult and political (in) correctness in Nigerian stand-up jokes. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, *7*(2).

Obadare, E. (2009). The uses of ridicule: Humour, 'infrapolitics' and civil society in Nigeria. *African Affairs*, *108*(431), 241-261.

______________ . (2010). State of travesty: jokes and the logic of socio-cultural improvisation in Africa. *Critical African Studies*, *2*(4), 92-112.

______________ . (2016). *Humor, silence, and civil society in Nigeria* (Vol. 69). Boydell & Brewer.

Okadigwe, N. and El Sawy, A. (2022). Resisting Shame and the Male Gaze: Humour Evocations in the Acts of Noha Kato and Real Warri Pikin. *Stand-up Comedy in Africa: Humour in Popular Languages and Media*. Ed. Nwankwo, I. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag. (109-126)

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

Orji, B. E. (2018). Humour, satire and the emergent stand-up comedy. *The European Journal of Humour Research*, *6*(4), 24-38.

Otiono, N. & Akoma C. (2021). Oral literary Performance in Africa: Beyond Genre. London and New York: Routledge.

Otiono, N. (2014, February 5) *The Adventures of Akpos, the Maverick: Street Stories, Humor, and the Nigerian Digital Imaginary* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbVfw6Ppn1U. Accessed 1 January 2021.

______________ . (1987). "Nweke Momah: A Portrait of an Oral Artist." Unpublished Masters Thesis. University of Ibadan.

Parker. Z. (2002). 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. *South African Theatre Journal*, *16*(1), 8–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/10137548.2002.9687739

Pype, K. (2015). Funerary Comedies in Contemporary Kinshasa: Social Difference, Urban Communities and the Emergence of a Cultural Form. *Africa, 85*(3), 457-477. Retrieved from doi:10.1017/S0001972015000224.

Rehak, J.P. & Trnka, S. (2019). *The Politics of Joking: Anthropological Engagements*. Oxon & New York: Routledge.

Seirlis, J. K. (2011). Laughing all the way to freedom?: Contemporary stand-up comedy and Democracy in South Africa. *Humor*, *24*(4), 513-530.

Sunday, A. & Filani, I. (2019). Playing with culture: Nigerian stand-up comedians joking with cultural beliefs and representations beliefs and representations. *HUMOR*, *32*(1), 97-124. https://doi.org/10.1515/humor-2017-0085

Uzonitsha, M. Personal Interview. November 18, 2016.

Van Graan, M. (2014). African Creative Industries: The Sleeping Giant. *African Business* 405, 14-19.

www.encyclopedia.com. "Blackface." Retrieved from https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/blackface

Yékú, J. (2016). Akpos don come again: Nigerian cyberpop hero as trickster. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, *28*(3), 245-261.

30 Days in Atlanta. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/30_Days_in_Atlanta