

Orality, Humour and the Rhetorical Discourse of Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria

Peter E. Omoko, *PhD*
Department of English
Delta State College of Education
Mosogar, Delta State, Nigeria

Abstract

The place of stand-up comedy as a major aesthetic sight in Africa is no longer in doubt. It has established itself in the last two decades as one of the artistic forms that connect the performer and the audience in a single shared experience. However, this genre of artistic creation has its roots in oral tradition where it constitutes the aesthetic channel through which the African people dispel boredom as well as come to terms with social reality. The oral artist in traditional societies serves as the recorder of traditional mores and the social critic from whose mouth the tyrant king is sanctioned. These attributes also foreground the aesthetic goal of the stand-up comedian in Africa. This essay examines the aesthetic significance of anecdotal references and allusions in selected stand-up comedy performances in Nigeria. The allusions and references in the jokes performed implicate important personal experiences, and serve as social responses to remarkable events, with humorous and exaggerated expressions enriching their profundities. The analytical materials for the study are gotten from selected digitised comedy shows of I Go Die and AY – two of the most celebrated stand-up comedians in Africa. The study draws essential analytical resources from the postcolonial theory in the context of “re-storying” the discarded socio-political thoughts of the people. The essay reveals that, for the African people, stand-up comedy serves various utilitarian and aesthetic functions and concludes that the stand-up comedians, through their comedies, contribute to the development of national consciousness from the discourses generated in the process.

Keywords: I Go Die, AY, Orality, Humour, Stand-up Comedy

Introduction

The centrality of stand-up comedy to the Nigerian people has in recent times, heightened, beyond the status of a mere pastime. It has become one of the major artistic channels through which contemporary Nigerian folks, like their traditional counterparts who after evening meals, gathered around the *ogwan* of the grandfather or around the stool of the grandmother, to listen to various tales and relieve themselves from daily stress and boredom. In recent years, stand-up comedy has come to be associated with almost every important event in Nigeria. It is performed at funerals, child naming ceremonies, chieftaincy conferment, birthdays, as well as marriage ceremonies.

It also constitutes the aesthetic fulcrum of many political and even academic gatherings. In other words, there is hardly any event one attends these days that one form of joke or the other is not enacted. Many churches today have also employed the services of stand-up comedians to thrill their congregations. However, despite its immense significance in the aesthetic life of the people, there has been little academic study devoted to the evaluation of this fast evolving genre of African popular culture. This essay is therefore a modest contribution to the scholarship of this vast field of African literature. The study seeks to examine the aesthetic significance of anecdotal references and allusions in selected stand-up comedies in

Nigeria. Also, the selected texts will be interrogated against the backdrop of the diverse knowledge sites about the African environment, social and political history, as well as patterns of thought over the decades.

Stand-up Comedy and its Oral Antecedents

The art of stand-up comedy as a medium of artistic entertainment has its roots in the oral tradition of the African people. Therefore, for a fuller appreciation of its contemporary literary form, it is necessary to interrogate its oral ancestry. In traditional African societies, jokes play an essential role in the aspect of humour and social relaxation among the people. It is performed as light-hearted bits of entertainment especially at occasions that demand merry-making. In many African societies, whenever there is an important event that requires two families or communities, a spokesperson is usually appointed to speak on behalf of each group. Such a spokesperson must be knowledgeable in the history and cultural lores of the people. In the Urhobo society, such a spokesperson is referred to as *otota* and recently as an orator. This term “orator”, is “essentially derived from the professionalism that is now associated with the art and technicalities involved in manipulating the Urhobo language by the joke-performer who exhibits great wit and humour in a manner that induces laughter and excitement in the audience/listeners (Omoko 2018: 74). In the course of his negotiation, the spokesperson intersperses his discussion with proverbs, allusions and various anecdotal references that not only persuade the listeners to his point of

argument but thrill them. This is why Philip Aghoghovwia avers that the “good orator... calls to his aid the folkloric elements manifest in legends, folktales, proverbs, myths, and oral rhetoric of his culture” (119) during performance.

Hence in many of the anecdotal references in the jokes of the stand-up comedians, there is an intricate relationship between oral artistic vanguard and contemporary literary commitments, all in an attempt to reconstruct the African oral creative legacies. Chinua Achebe’s evaluation of “the generic qualities of creative literature as an imaginativeness whose function is to practically educate, edify and challenge the audience” (qtd. in Kalu Uka, 1978:20) is very instructive here. The aesthetic gratification that one gets from the anecdotal references of the modern stand-up comedies does not only entertain the audience but educates and challenges them into rethinking and reassessing some amoral tendencies in the society. As the jokes unfold, one finds vignettes of the old African oral cultural nuances intermixed with current self-telling elements that connect the people to their ancestral roots. Here, satire becomes the literary technique in commenting on contemporary affairs. As I have noted elsewhere, in traditional African societies, nobody is bigger than the artist’s satirical butt because his artistic evangelism is borderless. Even if the oral artist is a commoner, his creative gifts give him a revered status in the society. In other words, whenever individuals or groups fall short of societal expectations, it is the artist that boldly comes out to point out such wrong doings in songs. The artist sometimes achieves this means through

masking (*iten*) – distancing the subject of the satirical butt by pretending to attack another person. In this way, society was able to regulate its highs and lows and achieve equilibrium in the social order (Omoko, 2015: 3). It is against this backdrop that Charles Nnolim submits that:

Literature exists in the main as a corrective to human folly, as a humanising agent, and as the uplifter of our souls through its affected powers. [...It] appeals to our sense of order, restraint, discipline, imparting in its wake a sense of decorum and proportion, and especially the virtue of humility (160).

The art of joke telling is therefore aimed at re-inventing the African oral story-telling practice but in this instance, seeks to re-ignite a social consciousness in which the common goal of society can be achieved from whatever social class one finds himself. David Ekanem Udoinwang agrees with this view when he explains that for the stand-up comedian, the “oral tale-telling tradition becomes the means to reorder the past and for placing experience in that context as dictated by contemporary circumstances” (246). Stand-up comedy has therefore established itself as the artistic media that connect the African people with their oral past.

The Dialectics of Postcolonialism in Nigerian Stand-up Comedy

The deployment of the postcolonial theory in this essay allows us to interrogate the basic signification that constitutes the performance principles of stand-up comedy. In the context of this study, postcolonialism entails a total rejection of Eurocentric stereotypes both in language and literary styles by the suppressed people (African artist), by reasserting the repressed cultural aesthetics of the African people; including its artistic nuances, in their literary creations. This essentially derives from the fact that the inherent indices of postcolonialism has to do with the colonised people’s desire to reassert themselves against all western restrictive theoretical structures that tend to relegate the people’s cultures to the background. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their book, *The Empire Writes Back* explain that “the idea of ‘post-colonial literary theory’ emerges from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of post-colonial writing” (11). Hence, stand-up comedies thrive in reassessing various socio-economic and political values of the people through radical use of the Nigerian *pidgin* as an indigenous language indicator in order to pass across, in details, moral and aesthetic significance of various anecdotal references in the comedies. According to Kole Omotoso, “...if there is to be any cultural liberation, people subjected to imperialism must reassert themselves by re-defining themselves in their own language or group of languages” (299). Adrian Beard confirms the place of language in the shaping of a people’s

ideology when he insists that language “is not something somehow separate from the ideas it contains but the way language is used says a great deal about how the ideas have been shaped” (18).

In Nigeria, the stand-up comedians are the best users of Nigerian languages particularly the Nigerian *pidgin*, an indigenous language that is similar to the Jamaican *Creole* which they “pushed... to new limits, renewing and reinvigorating them by coining new words and new expressions, and generally expanding their capacity to incorporate new happenings in Africa and the world” (Ngugi, 1986:23). The place of language as a repository of the people’s cultural heritage as expressed by Ngugi agrees with the point I have made elsewhere about the role of literature in the sustenance of a people’s language thus:

one of the channels through which human beings have propagated languages and sustained their cultural identity and worldview is through literature. This is because literature examines all aspects of human experiences and represents them in a manner that is useful and gratifying. That is, changing experiences gained through emotions and feelings from which we derive wisdom that is distilled from numerous encounters and experiences (Omoko, 2015:132).

The dialectics of postcolonialism in this essay therefore locates stand-up comedy within the African cultural milieu in which

the artists become the best users of the people’s language in its creative form to comment on social issues that affect both the rich and poor in the society. Stand-up comedy does not only draw from the essential relationship between literature and counter hegemonic structures, but establishes an aesthetic mode in which the highs and lows in the society interact in a single atmosphere of humour. It is this artistic consciousness that foregrounds the place of stand-up comedy in the minds of the people. Many of the stand-up comedians are people who had experienced humble beginnings until their creative gifts lifted them to stardom. It is therefore very easy for them to navigate between the borderline of the rich and the poor of the society in one connecting thread of the Nigerian pidgin; a language that unites the people across religious, ethnic, social and economic background. The use of the Nigerian pidgin as the performance language of the stand-up comedies therefore makes the ideas and issues adumbrated in the comedies accessible to both the educated and non-educated alike. Hence, in the performance of the Nigerian stand-up comedy, a class symmetry that cements the positive and negative sentiments of the society is enacted. R. N. Egudu highlights these sentiments which he believes exist between the virtues of good and vice in the creative responsibilities of the artist who recreates society’s values in his works for the people to evaluate and judge. According to him,

This social relationship indeed implies both positive and negative attitudes which include

likes and dislikes, admiration and aversion, assistance and hindrance, and so on. For in society, the good and accepted norms of behaviour – virtues in general – are loved and admired, while social disvalues and vices are hated and decried. And those individuals in the society who represent these groups of opposing traits are liked or disliked by the others as the case may be (36).

Nigerian stand-up comedy relies significantly on the twin concepts of facts and fiction as a compelling nuance in the reconstruction of the people's chequered history and humanity in order to create humour. According to Awhefeada, the stand-up comedian "often contrives most of the anecdotes. Even when they are factual, he is at liberty to tamper with them by foisting his own imaginative contrivance on them to achieve a particular purpose which could be didactic, educative or entertaining" (189).

In Nigeria, there are significant numbers of stand-up comedians who have distinguished themselves in this popular culture of rib-cracking joke-comedies. Some of the established names are: Ali Baba, AY (Ayo Makun), I Go Dye, Basket Mouth, Akpororo, Klint De Drunk, Gordons, Gandoki and Julius Agwu. Others are Seyi Law, MC Shakara, Funny Bone, Elenu, Kelly Blind, Ajebo, Ushbebe, Acapella, Pencil and Helen Paul. This study however focuses on the comedy output of I Go Dye and AY as

representative samples of the poetics of the stand-up comedy tradition in Nigeria. This is because their comedies best exemplify the complexities of themes, orality, humour and aestheticism that this essay seeks to explore. I Go Dye, for instance, uses many of his jokes to comment on the social relationship that exists between the rich and the poor, as well as attack women for their insatiable taste for materialism. I Go Dye states in an interview recorded in his album, *The Game Changer: Money, Power, Respect* that he stands "between the gaps; telling those in power that they hold the essence of civil responsibility. Most importantly, by giving hope. Because without hope, there is no future".

In this regard, I Go Dye addresses his comedies on various institutions in the Nigerian social space that ordinarily should protect the common man but appear to hunt them. In one of his jokes, he satirises the hypocrisies inherent in the Nigerian judicial system where lawyers exploit their clients by misadvising them about the true nature of their cases in courts. He also lampoons the Nigerian army who regale their significance by physically and psychologically brutalising innocent citizens that they enlisted to protect. The joke's anecdotes elicit laughter and cheers from the audience because they are factual representation of what the people daily experience in the society. The jokes are interspersed with snippets of dramatic and intriguing movements, pauses, grunts, gestures and facial expressions in a manner that the vice being satirised comes out vividly. In this kind of joke, since it is sometimes told on important occasions where members of such satirised institutions are present, the comedian

deploys the technique of dramatic irony. That is, saying one thing and meaning the opposite. For instance, in this joke, I Go Dye begins by showering praises on Nigerian lawyers and armies.

I love lawyers
For this country,
Na only two people I respect
And na only two people I like
Lawyer and soldier man – army
I like them!

This device heightens the joke's humour as the audience presses on to hear the reason why the comedian would single out these two institutions for celebration. The device also serves as a deflating measure in reducing the satirical temper of the joke. Hence, as the comedian goes further to expose the shortcomings of these two national institutions, the audience only sits back to relish the humour in the joke. The comedian tells us:

Lawyers go make you think say
Anything wey e happen
No matter the case, you are right
Whether you commit the highest crime
He go tell you say: "you are not guilty
Let's go!"
He go give you hope
Till... you go even dey enter cell
Then he go say:
"Let us try appeal!"

The anecdote above unfolds in realistic details, the inherent mediocrity that is associated with Nigerian legal practitioners. Contemporary Nigerian lawyers seek money at the expense of the integrity of their profession. Instead of advancing legal facts that would extricate

their clients from their judicial entanglement, they prepare shoddy cases that end with their clients behind bars. Since their concern is predicated on bribes and falsehood, they cheaply lure their clients into parting with huge sums of money which at the end will only see them losing their cases. And because the Nigerian legal system is fraudulent, the request for appeal is easily advocated. Here, the gullible client is further plunged into more psychological trauma in which oftentimes, he not only loses his money but ends in jail. It is thus this realistic commentary on society that foregrounds the aesthetic gratification that the audience derive from the jokes. It is in this sense that Parry posits that:

The literature of every country and every time is understood as it ought to be only by the author and his contemporaries. Between him and them there exists a common stock of experiences which enables the author to mention an object or to express an idea with the certainty that his audience will imagine the same object or will grasp the subtleties of his idea (qtd in Azuonye 2008:76).

Furthermore, in this same joke, the artist graphically and dramatically narrates how at a seminar, a Nigerian lawyer had radicalised him and others to believe that the Nigerian army can be confronted with the issue of Fundamental Human Rights:

You have to fight for your rights
You don't allow soldier men or policemen
to intimidate you

If you know your fundamental human rights,
they cannot!

Here, the audience roar with laughter over the untruths in the statement. In Nigeria, the military and the police treat the citizens they were enlisted to protect as conquered people. They harass and brutalise the people at the slightest provocation. It is thus foolhardy for anyone to confront the military openly in public, especially at a military checkpoint with matters of fundamental human rights. The artist was given the humiliation of his life the moment he tried to contest his fundamental human rights at a military checkpoint. The comedian narrates his ordeals amidst gesticulation and facial expression thus:

Who send me?
Na e I carry the thing enter road
Na e one soldier man stop me
“Your papers!”
E never even say your papers,
I don dey quote everything when soldier
man dey talk
Excuse me!
I have the fundamental human rights...
Before I say fur...ther,
I just hear, gbo oooo (slap)!!

You know say e get the kind slap
Wey dem go slap you
You go dey even dey talk to stranger
Gbo ooooo!!!
(*long pause, gesticulates, demonstrates, and mimics situation.*)
The next thing wey I just hear be say
“Kai!
I dey talk to you, I dey talk back
I dey craze?
Quiet...!

Come here!”
This time my eye don really clear
I come really know say na Nigerian army
(*General laughter.*)

The people cheered and laughed to these jokes because it answers to their prejudices about these national institutions. Ultimately, I Go Dye has, through these jokes, commented on two significant institutions in every society that give the citizens either a sense of belonging or despair. His commentary, however, unfolds the degeneration in the Nigerian society where the masses have not only become voiceless but hopeless from the various inhuman treatments they undergo in the hands of state institutions. I Go Dye expresses this point when he tells us that his jokes are meant to correct some social disorder in the society:

I believe that comedy is beyond making people laugh. Each time on stage, I fight against our fears, which is poverty. When I see the warming ovation, even off-stage, the love the people show makes me feel that my work, professionally, is accepted. I just know that I owe the masses an obligation to speak the truth about those in power. I was born a victim and I know that millions of children are still faced with these challenges” (*The Game Changer...*).

In another joke performed in *AY Live* Vol. 23, *I Go Dye* ridicules African girls who feel inferior because of the colour of their skin. Many girls in Africa feel that they would be prettier if their skin colour was fair; hence they resort to using bleaching creams which end up destroying the pigmentations of their skins. In this joke, the artist lampoons these girls who, despite the obvious distortions in their skins, still deny using bleaching creams. The stand-up comic vilifies them amidst dramatic gesticulation thus:

Area!

De one wey dey vex me pass

We dey this country everybody na oyibo na

Any girl wey dem born black

Before three months, four months dem don yellow

All of dem now dey use cream

Dem wan turn oyibo by force

And the one wey dey vex me

Once you just tell a girl say:

“You dey bleach”

That thing dey vex her

She go say: “don’t say dat,

I don’t even rob cream

I use ordinary baby oil”

No girl go ever agree say she dey bleach.

Me, you can’t deceive me o!

You fit bleach every part of the body

But e get only one part of the body wey you no go fit bleach

Me, that centre of yanch (buttocks)

I dey spread am dey look am

“See here, NEPA take light for here?”

The image of NEPA (the defunct National Electric Power Authority of Nigeria) explicates the significance of blackness to

the African people. NEPA is a Nigerian power generation and distribution company set up to generate and ensure a regular supply of electricity to Nigerians. However, instead of constant power supply, it only supplies the people with constant darkness. Thus, out of frustration, the Nigerian government sold it to private companies. It is, therefore, this image of blackness which constitutes the darkness that the comedian invoked to foreground the significance of the dark skin of the African people. The dark coloured skin of the African people explains their uniqueness. One can apply bleaching creams to his/her body to alter the skin colour to whatever colour he/she wishes but cannot transform other skin colours to black. Here, NEPA which symbolises power blackout adumbrates the African melanin.

Furthermore, *I Go Dye* uses some of his joke-comedies to contrast the beauties and development in the West with those of Nigeria. These jokes question the patriotism of the Nigerian political leaders who savour the transformations in other countries and turn blind eyes to the Nigerian state. In other words, these jokes are performed to evaluate how Nigerians are perceived abroad. In many of these comedies, the artist who assumes the position of a participant adopts the dream technique to highlight a utopia world where Nigeria can be at par with other developed countries of the world. In the joke, “American Passport” in *AY Live* Vol. 23, for instance, the artist dramatises how the American passport rates in the international communities. In this joke, the fellow with the American passport displays inappropriate actions of rudeness

to the immigration officers in a London airport but despite his unruly behaviour, he is treated with utmost courtesy because he paraded an American passport. This action infuriated the comedian who decided to act in like manner, brandishing his Nigerian passport to the embarrassment of the immigration officers in the London airport. Despite the suspense and intrigues that played out at the airport, the artist was attended to with the same courtesy the American was given. However, the entire scenario that surrounds the comedian's rude behaviour in the airport was only in the artist's dream!

Na e I shook hand for pocket,
Bring my passport come outside
"Federal Republic of Nigeria"
Na e I throw am for ground, "pull!"
"That is my *gaddem*, fucking passport"
First time for my life when I see
immigration officer apologise
"Sorry sir. I never knew you were holding
a Nigerian passport
You are welcome to London"
Na e I pick my passport
Do the same thing wey the American guy
talk
Na I say: "Fuck you!
He wants to see my *gaddem*, fucking
passport"
When I wake up,
Na dream!
(*General laughter.*)

The humour in the joke derives essentially from the fact that Nigerians have in recent times despite her huge human and natural resources been disrespected by many western countries due to the bad image of the country created by unscrupulous and corrupt political leaders and desperate

individuals abroad. At every international airport, Nigerians are not only seen as criminals but are subjected to various humiliating checks. Writing on the destruction that the Nigerian politicians have wrought on the psyche of the people and the image of the country, Omotoso asks:

Is it any wonder then that people, in Nigeria, for instance, have always seen the government, their government, as something to cheat and plunder without any sense of guilt? Is it any wonder that political struggle among the elite for power has always left the masses of the people as mere spectators? (301).

But, here, we have an artist who is bold enough to break through all such national and international barriers, with a conviction that if an American can be so treated nicely despite his faults and unruly behaviour, a Nigerian should also be accorded such courtesy no matter the circumstance. Hence when he was treated nicely despite parading a Nigerian passport, the audience who were once apprehensive of what would happen to him as he dramatises the joke, were excited. Basically, since the chief goal of stand-up comedy is to elicit laughter in the audience, the comedian tells the audience that he woke up to find that he was only dreaming. However, dream or no dream, the patriotic point of the comedian has been stressed. T.S. Eliot observes that "the author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings,

whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not" (48). The comedian still believes that Nigeria shall surely earn its once positive international recognition someday. This comedy therefore prepares the people to be patriotic no matter the situation or position they may find themselves. In other words, the moral deduction that the audience get from the joke is that it is high time that Nigerians started reassessing and readjusting themselves to reflect positive attitudes that can promote acceptance and recognition in the international community. As the comedian says at the beginning of the joke, ... I dey always tell people

No matter where you are from
Be proud of yourself
I am proud to say I am a Nigerian
And I respect myself as a Nigerian
And e no get as e be
When I go fit take deny my country,
Nigeria
I see some oyibo there
They are proud of their countries
I am proud of my country
Because Nigeria is the best country in the world
Take it from me!

This is thus the point where the anecdotal references in the stand-up comedies connect the individuals and groups to a shared folk heritage of the Nigerian people and this in itself promotes cultural renewal and continuities.

Like I Go Dye, AY (Ayo Makun) is not only an award-winning comedian but one of the most talented and outstanding humourists in Africa. His *AY Live* comedy series is one of the most

significant comedy show in the continent that brings together all the comedians and musicians in Africa under one umbrella of performance. The series which was started in 2000 has come out with over 32 volumes. AY jokes comment on issues that affect both the rich and the poor in the society as well as foreground the tricky use of language by many Nigerian pastors to hypnotise their adherents. In many of these jokes, he mimics the voices of these pastors in a manner that elicits laughter in the audience. In *AY Live*, Volume 7 for instance, he tells a joke in which pastors Chris Okotie and Chris Oyakhilomhe, two of the most flamboyant and influential pastors in Nigeria were officiating as lead pastor and interpreter in a church service respectively. In this occasion, a woman was brought out suffering from what Pastor Chris Okotie calls "Sava-vice of the anus" which he explained to mean "the inability to mess" (fart). The moment the woman's condition was announced to Oyakhilomhe, he calls the woman out and paraded her around the altar stage saying:
Bring her here
Mess...
My sister mess...
My sister mess...
(Immediately the woman started farting)
Mess...
My sister mess....!
You can mess now...!
Give Jesus a big hand....!

In this comedy, the comedian ridicules the fancy displays of miracles by contemporary "men of God" in which trivial and personal matter like an inability to fart is universalised by these pastors as medical condition that needed divine

intervention for its cure. The use of “fart” as an operating specimen in the joke is deliberate. It foregrounds the height of debasement that these so-called “men of God” have taken the liberty of Jesus Christ. The value of the joke is further enhanced by the intriguing use of the image of “mess” (fart) to represent an ideal that captures the pastor’s anointing fancy. In other words, his dramatisation and mimicking of the voices of the pastors only intensify the aesthetic gratification of the joke.

One essential aspect of AY’s stand-up comedy is his resort to short dramatic pieces that often centre on a particular thematic preoccupation. Through these dramatic pieces, AY is able to satirise national institutions like the police whose services have become anti-people and at the same time, lampoon individual and family lives. In one of these dramatic pieces enacted in his *AY Live Volume 22*, a married couple who had been married for about eight years without a child decide to seek the face of God upon the insistence of the wife, Maggi who reminded her husband, Boniface, that all her younger sisters have given birth to children. In her desperation, the troubled wife invited some prophets to their home for special prayers. In the course of the prayer, however, the senior prophet asks the woman to go into the bedroom with him because in the full view of her husband, the miracle they seek cannot be achieved. As both of them go inside the bedroom, the helpless husband watches in apprehension. He only hears the moaning sound of the prophet and the wife coming out of the bedroom thus:
Prophet: Repeat after me, “power enter me!”

Woman: “Power enter me!”

After satisfying himself, the prophet asks the husband to go inside the bedroom to sleep with his assistant who is a man to ascertain if the childless husband was fertile. Here, the audience roar with laughter as the idea of homosexuality was suggested. Besides, how can a man seeking a child make love with a fellowman as a prerequisite to ascertain his fertility? The humour in the comedy is further heightened when the assistant reminds his master that in Nigeria, homosexuality is prohibited and anyone caught engaging in it is sent to prison to serve a fourteen-year jail term. The dramatic input is thus centred on prophets who take advantage of troubled homes to lure desperate housewives to bed. Hence, when the idea of homosexuality is introduced, the enraged cuckold husband pursues them around with a dangerous weapon until they leave the stage. What this dramatic piece does is to expose the audience to the religious hypocrisies that are inherent in the so-called modern churches. Women are often gullible in falling prey to the excesses of these false prophets. The joke not only entertains the audience, but passes as a social commentary on the shared experience of the people.

In another short comedy, AY contrasted the police interrogation system in the United States of America and those of some states in Nigeria. In this comedy, the artist gives a realistic picture of what transpires in most police cells in Nigeria as different from what is obtainable in civilised societies. In the first police interrogation room for example, the police

officer (AY), a New York police officer, interrogates a suspect after a bank robbery in a relaxed manner and when the suspect requested for a cigarette, he was promptly given. The scenario is dramatised thus:

Policeman: On the first of January this year, the bank of Brooklyn was held

siege by gunmen. Two billion dollars was carted away, a bank staff and a security man got killed. (*Brings out a wallet from his suit breast pocket.*) A wallet was found in the crime scene – apparently belonging to one of the robbers.

What do you say?

Suspect: I say I need a cigarette. (*Policeman brings out a cigarette and hands it over to the suspect who takes out a stick and puts it in his mouth.*)

Policeman: The wallet belongs to you. What do you say?

Suspect: Can I get a light?

Policeman: I see you are waiting for your lawyer before you speak, right?

Suspect: No sir. I just want to smoke a cigarette. (*The policeman brings out a lighter and lights up the cigarette for the suspect.*)

Policeman: So?

Suspect: On the 29th of December last year, I was robbed at the subway and I filed a report at the precinct. Your precinct here in Brooklyn. I'm really happy about this because you all do what you say you do. You protect, and you serve. (*Collects his wallet.*) Thank you for finding my wallet. (*Leaves.*)

The above scene foregrounds a civilised police setting where the fundamental human rights of the individual are respected, where a suspect is not pronounced guilty until proven so by a court of competent jurisdiction. As the drama unfolds, the Nigerian audience is placed in an ideal world where things work, where they only smile in their subconscious and wish things like this happen in their country. Hence, in a contrasting situation in a police interview room, in a Nigerian Police Station in Lagos, the audience are treated to what is obtainable in Nigeria where a policeman starts his interrogation with severe torture of his suspect. Even when the suspect tells him that he dropped a report at the police station when his wallet was stolen by hoodlums, the police deny knowledge of such entry and insist that the suspect must confess to a crime he knows nothing about. The suspect adds more problems to his case when he requests for a cigarette. He is given the beating of his life.

Policeman: (*Tortures suspect.*) Where were you on the 1st of January?

Wazobia bank was robbed. You killed the security man and a banker.

Suspect: No sir. I was in church.

Policeman: (*Tortures suspect.*) Confess now.

Suspect: Okay sir. I was with my girlfriend.

Policeman: With your girlfriend? Police are working and you are with your...

(*Tortures suspect.*) Shut up! Who is the owner of this wallet?

Suspect: It's mine.

Policeman: It's yours. You are a criminal. (*Tortures suspect.*)

Suspect: Sir, but this wallet is mine. I was robbed just close by here and I came to drop my report.

Policeman: (*Tortures suspect.*) How many robbers rob robbers? Do robbers rob themselves?

Suspect: But I dropped a report on the same day in this station.

Policeman: You dropped a report in this station? In short, we did not see any report. (*Tortures suspect.*)

You think I am joking?

Suspect: I just want to have some cigarettes

Policeman: Confess now. Cigarette? You really want to smoke cigarette?

Suspect: Yes!

Policeman: You really want to smoke cigarette? (*Brings out an electric air-*

dryer with which he tortures the suspect.)

The dramatic piece ends with a significant caption which serves as the motto of the Nigerian Police Force: "The police is your friend".

The third scenario is enacted in the "Dugbe Police Station" at Ibadan, Oyo State of Nigeria. In this situation, the entire scene is dramatised in Yoruba which is the major language of communication in the state. The intrigues in this version of the police interrogation is fraught with charms and magic, a feature which punctuates the people's way of life that foregrounds charms and magic. The incident is dramatised thus:

Policeman: On the 1st of January this year, Wazobia Bank was held siege by

gunmen. Two hundred million naira was carted away, and a bank staff and a security guard were killed.

Suspect: I am aware.

Policeman: How did you know? Ha! Today, you must confess. You are a thief.

Suspect: Is that why you raise your shoulders like a cork running after a

hen? So you think we don't watch NTA, Silverbird, and Channels News in our neighbourhood?

Young man, sit down and find me a cigarette. I feel like smoking. *(Aside.)* ...He's just puffing up.

Policeman: You really want to smoke?

Suspect: Yes.

Policeman: You must be mistaking me for *Fally Ipupa*.

Suspect: That's your problem, give me a cigarette.

Policeman: Enh! You insist you want to smoke?

Suspect: Yes!

Policeman: Now, you've become the author of your own undoing. Wait for

your cigarette. *(Opens a bag and brings out a charm.)* Today, you must confess. *(Invokes the names of some gods and casts a spell on the suspect.)*

Suspect: *(Furious.)* Stop pumping those expired powder into my yes.

...what's your problem? Do you want me to get red eyes from those evil powders of yours? Why must you pump stuff, are you a vulcanizer? Now that you've started it, you will pay dearly for it. *(Invokes some spiritual powers.)* Oh ye goddess, send down your powers. *(A charm appears from nowhere. He holds it and smiles.)* Are you a learner? You tried to play smart. *(Conjures the powers of the charm and casts a spell on the police man who falls back to his chair and faints. Smiles, and continues with his invocation.)* There is no way a Bold 5 will not 'hang'. I disappear not through the influence of infrared,

Bluetooth, but my magic. (*He vanishes only to find himself in a cell in the police station.*)

Policeman: (*Meets him locked up in the cell. Smiles.*) I'm now in possession

of your charm as Nigeria is in possession of the Nation's Cup. Even Usain Bolt cannot outrun my speed. Don't you know we operate with 4G wireless? Yet you called me a learner. (*Thus, subduing the suspect through magical powers.*)

What this comedy does is to expose the inherent failures in the Nigerian justice system, especially with regards to the shoddy manner in which investigations are carried out. In Nigeria, the citizens' rights to fair hearing are besmeared by the system. Through various inhuman treatments, the people are coerced into giving false confessions which have made many innocent citizens to either lose their lives or end up in jails. These jokes are enacted to re-adjust the social consciousness of the people to the insensitivity that has become the hallmark of the Nigerian state. The comedians are aware of the aesthetic significance of their art, even as they engage various socio-

political vices that have become entrenched in the Nigerian social space. They understand that "all arts" as Schiller puts it, "is dedicated to joy, and there is no higher and no more serious problem than how to make men happy. The right art is that alone which creates the highest enjoyment" (992). In other words, the exploitation of clients/bribery and corruption by lawyers, military/police brutality of innocent citizens, false prophets sleeping with gullible housewives are all moral issues that are reconstructed through rib-cracking jokes to educate as well as entertain. In this way, the Nigerian stand-up comedians feel the existential contradictions that pervade the socio-political existence of the Nigerian people and through their artistic vision, subtly appeal to the consciences of those engaged in various amoral tendencies.

Conclusion

It has been shown in this essay that stand-up comedy is one of the most significant artistic genres that not only connect the performer and the audience in a single shared experience but a form by which the people dispel boredom as well as come to terms with social reality. Stand-up comedy comments on socio-political issues, drawing from the social and cultural pool of the people, and even distinct environmental images in the satire of known vices. It has thus established itself as a form of popular culture in Nigeria that not only seeks the aesthetic gratification of the audience but attempts a reconstruction of the people's shared experiences in their quest for an ideal society. The humour and aestheticism that the audience derive from the various anecdotal references in the comedies help the people to re-adjust

themselves to conform to societal norms for the good of all.

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About the author

Dr Peter E. Omoko is with the Department of English, Delta State College of Education, Mosogar, Delta State, Nigeria. Email: peteoms@gmail.com, Cell: +234 7034 711 220, +234 8054 208 867