

The socio-political aesthetics of Nigerian Pidgin in stand-up comedy and popular music

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Abstract

This paper examines the place of the Nigerian Pidgin in Stand-up comedy and popular music in Nigeria and foregrounds the socio-political tempers inherent in them. It explores the peculiar language features that have not only made stand-up comedy and popular music in Nigeria a national artistic brand but an international phenomenon that has endeared the Nigerian artists to global audiences. The paper adumbrates the fact that one of the most significant features of Nigerian stand-up comedy and popular music is the use of the English-lexifier of the Nigerian pidgin. The Nigerian pidgin is a domesticated version of the English language which has become a recurrent motif, both in the performance of telling jokes by Nigerian stand-up comedians as well as in the lyrics and metaphors of popular musicians. The paper establishes that by appropriating the linguistic elements of the Nigerian pidgin in their works, the artists not only employ syntactic features but adopt various rhetorical strategies to foreground and convey their message to the people.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Nigerian Pidgin, Stand-up comedy, popular music

Introduction

Stand-up comedy and popular music in Nigeria have not only become a national artistic brand but an international phenomenon that has endeared the Nigerian artist to global audiences. One of the most significant features of Nigerian stand-up comedy and popular music which has endeared it to their audience is the adumbration of the English-lexifier of the Nigerian pidgin. The Nigerian pidgin is a domesticated version of the English language which has become a recurrent motif, both in the performance of telling jokes by Nigerian stand-up comedians as well as in the lyrics and metaphors of popular musicians. Thus in the linguistic appropriation of the Nigerian pidgin in their works, the artists not only employ syntactic features but adopt various rhetorical strategies to foreground and convey their message to the people.

The reason for this artistic medium is not far-fetched. Nigeria as a country has a multiplicity of ethnic groups, each, with its own language and or dialect. It constitutes what Eckstein calls plural society which, according to him, is “one that is fragmented by ethnic, linguistic, religious or other boundaries” (14).

Besides, by Nigeria’s contact with Europe through colonialism, there is the obvious inevitability that the country is bilingual – the Nigerian indigenous language which experts believe is about 450 (Onoriose, 2006 and Yeibo, 2016) and the colonial language which is English; a situation which Yeibo describes as a phenomenon where two languages are used side-by-side, whether by an individual or a given society (486). Bloomfield also sees this condition as “the native-like control of two languages” (cited in Yeibo, 2016; 486). Thus in the case of Nigeria, Yeibo tells us that, “there is a multiplicity of indigenous languages and cultures numbering 450, all of which have their distinct potentials and idiosyncrasies” (502). However, instead of the English language to serve as the second language (L2) to majority of Nigerians, the Nigerian Pidgin has established itself as the unofficial national language of the country.

One of the most significant channels through which message and indeed, ideology can be passed to a large section of the people is language. It is an important aspect of society that helps to advance the consciousness of the general populace to popular ideals that are being

projected. According to Bertrand Russell (1971), “language can be used to express emotions and influence the behaviour of others... language serves not only to express thoughts but to make possible thoughts which do not exist without it” (137-138). In other words, language is the creative vehicle by which creative artists express their vision to the audience. Every artist tries as much as possible to reach his/her audience in a manner that his/her thoughts and ideologies are clearly understood by them.

Therefore, since language and literature serve as a significant tool for the preservation of the culture and experiences of a given society, the Nigerian stand-up comedians and popular musicians have, through their arts, exploited the resources of the Nigerian pidgin to the fullest. The artists believe, as Dumbi Osani (2008; 97) contends, that “language, as the substance of literature, is able to express ideas and feelings as well as reflect the realities of a given social group”. For instance, while majority of the populace, especially those in the cities and towns like Lagos, Kano, Ibadan, Kaduna, Port Harcourt, Warri, Sapele, Jos to mention only a few, may not be linguistically proficient in the language of the area, they may quite be in touch with the Nigerian pidgin. The Nigerian pidgin is a language that has garnered, overtime, its linguistic and cultural heritage that cut across the dichotomy between the rich and the poor in the country. It is the language of the market, the motor park as well as the language of the elite. This is because the Nigerian pidgin increases its vocabulary on a daily basis by the innovation of drawing linguistic materials from the major languages in the country to enrich itself in what Kachu (1982:330) would call “contact language and literatures”. As M.A. Alo (1998) avers, there “is the

natural human tendency to innovate in language, either for the sake of being creative and original or as a result of the need to express new objects, things or ideas...” (26). These innovations make the Nigerian pidgin a language that projects the country’s identity. Thus in order to be national in their artistic orientation, many of the artists resort to the Nigerian pidgin as a medium to reach their audience who are mainly the downtrodden. Images and anecdotes in the comedy and songs are drawn from the general pool of the people’s experiences. In using this medium of communication, the artists have succeeded in endearing themselves to their audience and garner enough fan-base for themselves. Ogaga Okuyade (2011; 164) expresses the usefulness of the Nigerian pidgin in the works of the stand-up comedians and popular musicians to the country’s social space and confirms that it “is public-oriented especially at the level of language”. According to him, Nigerian pidgin is mainly the medium of expression, a language whose syntax is wholly African, while most of its vocabulary is premised on lexical borrowings from English and indigenous languages”.

Popular as used in this essay, is any work of art that is created to serve the taste and needs of the masses. Its artistic orientation lies within the aesthetic gratification of the populace. It is a form of an art which Niyi Osundare (1987) believes is appreciated and actually read by a majority of the reading section of a given society. W. Onoriose (2006) supports this idea and goes ahead to explain that popular works of art engage in the “quotidian issues of the ordinary man’s life and not outlandish and grave issues concerning philosophies and metaphysics of human existence that serious literature preoccupies itself with” (423). This essay,

therefore, explores how the Nigerian pidgin (creoles) has been deployed by Nigerian stand-up comedians and popular musicians to reconstruct the Nigerian experience in a manner that challenges the social, economic and political norms of the country.

The works of the Nigerian stand-up comedians, for instance, thematise various aspects of the people's existential realities, using the aesthetic medium of the oral artist of old whose language the people understand. The comedians through their jokes which are couched in the Nigerian pidgin, advocate a better society where the poor can be given an enabling environment to survive side-by-side with the rich. They satirise all negative structures and ideologies that sustain the inequality that exists between the rich and the poor in the society. In one of his joke-performances, for instance, the comedian, Bash tells of an encounter between a wealthy man and a poor man in which the rich man who had bashed the poor man's car repaired it without stress but when it is the turn of the poor man to repair the rich man's car, he was dazzled at the price of the items in the rich man's car. The joke which is told with the aesthetic vignettes of the Nigerian pidgin lexifiers, opens thus:

For Asokoro here, one guy
dey drive Passat, 1982
Model
E dey with one babe wey e
just dey toast
D car wey dey come behind
na Range Rover Sport, 2013
Version
By mistake d Range Rover
Sport break d light of d
Passat, Kpo!
You know say poor man no
dey like rich man. E just
come down,

“Yes, yes, who do you think you are? Because you are driving Range, and so?”

The witch girl wey e carry na e come out, e say: “honey, don't mind dem.

If dem don see small money na so dem dey do. You too break his light.

D idiot no tink! E go inside motor go carry jack, waka go Range Rover Sport,

2013 model, break d two lights, Kpo! Kpo!

Rich man no dey make noise. Na e pick phone call spare parts:

“Hello, Chukwuemeka, how much be d light for Passat, 1982 model?”

Dem say one na N2,500. E say bring ten. In fact, put two, make am a dozen!

Dem bring d light come fix d light. Na e d rich man say: “I have fixed your light,

You too fix my light. Poor man say: “Yes, who do you think you are?

You have money, and so what? Spare parts seller, how much is the light

Of the Range Rover Sport?”

D Igbo guy first laugh. E say: “Nna, you must be joking.

Do you know dis car? Dis is padded clean Range Rover Sport.”

D guy say: “forget, how much is d light?”

D Igbo guy say: “d original no dey here. Even d China na ₦1.2m.”

D poor man shock! E say: “na d light I dey talk, no be d complete motor.”

D Igbo man say: “na d light I dey talk.
(*AY Live, Vol. 23*)

The comedian, in the above joke, does not only foreground the disparity between the rich and the poor, but adumbrates the social and economic happenings around him, especially as they affect the common man. And because his aim is to recreate events in the comedy that inhere on contemporary realities, he adopts various linguistic markers that endear him to his fans/audiences; that is, the Nigerian pidgin.

The disparity between the rich and the poor in the Nigerian society is well explicated in one of the joke-performances of the comedian, Acapella. In this joke, the comedian tells of how he visited a rich man who asks him to accompany him to pay his 7year old daughter’s one term school fees of one million, two hundred thousand naira, whereas, all through the comedian’s educational journey from primary school to the university, he did not spend half of that money. As he tells us:

I go visit one of my chairman, na e say:
“Acapella, escort me.
I wan to go pay my daughter school fees.
Na e I follow am. We go withdraw money from bank E come withdraw ₦1.2million. So for my mind, e go pay some,
We go hold some. D pikin na seven years.
As we reach d school, d man count the whole ₦1.2million give dem.
I no know when I ask am, “bros, she don dey do masters?”

E say: “No. Na still primary school.”

When we small how?
₦1.2million! Even till I finish school
Dem no spend am finish.
(*Nite of a Thousand laughs, Vol. 28*)

What the above comedian has done is not just to use the Nigerian pidgin to compose rib-cracking jokes but to align themselves with the challenges of the poor masses in the society. Through their jokes, they become the voice of the voiceless populace. This is the point Chinua Achebe raises when he avers, “if an artist is anything, he is a human being with heightened sensibility; he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations”. According to him, the artist cannot “therefore be aware of, or indifferent to, the monumental injustice which his people suffer” (79).

Thus in another joke-performance by MC Shakara, the comedian examines the state of the downtrodden in the Nigerian commercial city of Lagos. The poor masses, unlike their rich counterparts who live in affluence in Ikoyi, Victoria Island, Lekki and other beautiful towns in Lagos, live in crowded places in the ghettos, in what the comedian calls “face-me-I-face-you” apartments. The people here are the rejected, the poor masses who could not afford the bogus lifestyle of the rich in the rich-only cities in Lagos. They are only seen as hands, workers whose role in the society is to do menial jobs. In this environment, there are criminals who, because of hunger, could steal neighbour’s pot of food directly from the cooker while it is still being cooked. The comedian performs the joke thus:

Na e I go find house for one place. You know those face-me-I-face-you
D compound long, children come full d compound. In the morning,
You fit wake up dey baff anoda person pikin you no go know
Dat compound, if you dey cook dem go tief your pot of soup.
For dat compound, if you dey cook you go be like who dey do exercise.
Because ingredients dey inside room, pot and stove dey for passage
If you dey cook, you go go inside room, you go go carry maggi.
“Mama Nkechi, wetin you dey do?”
“I dey cook oh” as you dey go carry pepper come from inside
Meanwhile, d person wey wan tief am dey outside dey look you, you no know.
One day I come buy half derica of rice. As I dey cook, d guy wey wan tief am
Dey look me, I no know. I go carry currey, as I carry currey dey come,
Na e d guy say: “No put currey, I no dey like currey”
(*AY Live, Vol. 23*)

Institutional failures resonate around many of the joke-performances of the Nigerian stand-up comedians. In one of Akpororo’s jokes, the comedian satirises the Nigerian Police Force who lacks the technical

know-how to fight crimes but arrest anyone they see on the road on flimsy charges. He cracks the joke thus:

Nigerian police are d best
Because na only dem no dey use computer take find tief
As you dey waka pass, e fit just look you: “arrest am.
Na armed robber
(*Nite of a Thousand laughs, Vol. 28*)

The comedian, Acapella in another joke lampoons the Nigerian political elites for their insensitive politicking that has ended up polarising the people along poverty lines. Because of their social background, the people have been so cowed that they see their collective state of neglect as normal. No one tries to confront the political elites who have left them in the state of perpetual neglect. Provided what they suffer from in the society is also the challenge of their fellow compatriots in the slum, they are not bothered. Like the comedian jokes:

Everyday dem dey say
Nigeria go beta
Make dem tell us d date. If dat day reach, e no beta, we go go meet dem.
Wey you, e don expire o.
Because d wey dem dey rule dis country na is so annoying.
Everyone here na, na enemy to e neighbour.
Nobody wan see say e neighbour dey make am pass am.
Dat’s why for d area wey you dey live, wey NEPA seized light

D first thing wey dem dey
do na to check weda na for
everybody.
As dem take light, you go
just open window:
“Ah thank God! Na
everywhere o, nobody get.”
(*Nite of a Thousand laughs*,
Vol. 28)

In the comedian’s aesthetic construct, the phrases, “e no beta” and “NEPA seized light”, adumbrate retrogression and anticipates a nation without direction. In Nigeria, for instance, the politicians are fond of setting dates for progress in certain sectors of the economy. However, when the set date comes, they give excuses why it was not achieved. There had been vision 1990, 2000 and 2020 where the country will come out of the woods in specific sectors of the economy. These dates came but the visions were not met. The metaphor of NEPA, the defunct National Electricity Power Authority only foregrounds the level of socio-political failure in the country. The verb, “seized” shows the recklessness and insensitivity of the Nigerian state to the populace. Power is taken without any form of pre-information to the populace. The people are satisfied because their condition is not personal. As far as others are in similar condition as they are, they are not pained. With these kinds of lexical-semantic lexifiers, the artist has succeeded in exposing the failures of the government and elites in the society without hurting anyone’s ego.

Unlike their stand-up comedy counterparts, the Nigerian popular musicians are more vocal in confronting the socio-political institutions that have held the people down. The popular musicians are fearless, and they employ the potency of the Nigerian pidgin, like their comedian counterparts to radically

confront the system and government that have abandoned the populace in the trenches. Without mincing words, they placed the problems facing the country, whether political, social or economic, squarely on the door steps of the government.

Gloria Monica Emezue’s (2001) position on new Nigerian poets easily comes to mind especially when considered against the socio-political temper that birthed the works of the Nigerian popular musicians and the new Nigerian poets. According to her, these artists “lament the betrayal of the people’s genuine aspiration for a better life, poverty, unemployment, and the dilapidated state of the nation’s economy. Their anger over the vicious cycle of brutality that diminishes the nation is unmistakable” (126). Okuyade (2011) also expresses similar sentiments about the Nigerian popular musicians and assures us that the “artist in Africa has continued to make bold his position as the self-appointed guardian of the public good, not only on the grounds of reflecting the realities of everyday existence in their arts, but also seek to achieve coherence in the dissemination of their artistic evangelism in order to create an ordered world”. According to him, the “artist strives to make humankind better by helping to address human problems, and to find meaning in a world characterised by existential angst, man’s cruelty to himself and the world thereby making the world a better place! (162).

African China, outside Fela Anikulakpo Kuti, is among the significant voices of the Nigerian popular musicians who utilizes his music to create awareness on the plight of the poor masses whose condition of existence is debasing. They live in slums with potholed roads, without food and portable water and their existence is punctuated by perpetual darkness

because of lack of electricity, whereas, in contrast to their condition, the rich and political elite live in visible opulence. In his song, “Awa Govamet Bad”, for instance, he places the blame of unemployment, economic crisis and socio-political imbalance in the country on the door step of the government. To the musician, if there are good job opportunities in the country, those in the trenches will have something to engage in and at the same time feed their families. He therefore intones in the song, using the resources of the Nigerian pidgin thus:

Our government bad o
Dem no wan give ghetto
man job o
My God o
Cos if ghetto man no get
work
My brother, na how e go
take survive o

Although the popular musicians derive their resources from the socio-political rubrics that also foreground the works of the stand-up comedians, they have expanded the frontiers of their ideological aesthetics by assuming the role of the tribune of the masses. This is why Idamoyibo believes that the “musician is always trusted for saying things as he sees them – his own perspective of the truth is most often found to be reliable. He is seen as the conscience of the society, because he would not accept bribe to falsify issues that concern the development of his community or nation” (143). Thus the Nigerian popular musicians have become dissidents, opposing all socio-political structures that work against the good of society. Inherent in the above song, for instance, is the plight of the downtrodden who mainly live in the slums and shanties often described as ghettos. The youths in

these ghettos, because of lack of money, are mostly school drop-outs. And because of the high premium that is placed on paper certificates in Nigeria, they are jobless. To the musician, therefore, how can one survive an already bastardised future without a job?

With the use of the Nigerian pidgin in addressing topical issues that affect the masses, the musician has been able to convey his message to his audience and at the same time blaming the government for the problem. It is against this backdrop that Okuyade explains that the most fascinating feature of this brand of popular music is “its radical correspondence with popular issues plaguing the society”. According to him, the music “is in touch with the problems of daily life, in tune with the present democratic chaos of victory, annulment, and re-run/run-off, the atmosphere of disorder. The music is often syncretic, but nevertheless contributes positively to the development of the new order” (165).

The Nigerian popular musicians have not only domesticated the English language by the total interpolation of the Nigerian pidgin and other indigenous dialects in their songs, but have gone ahead to adopt what one might call a total replacement of the English language with the Nigerian pidgin in their effort to pass across their message to the audience. For instance in another song by Africa China, the musician lambasts the Nigerian government who through unpopular policies and corruption have rendered the people’s condition parlous. In a country that is blessed with both mineral and material resources, the people still lack basic amenities such as food, light and good roads. The musician crones in the song, “Mr President” thus:

Food e no dey

Broda eh water no dey
And our country no good o!
Everyday for d tief
One day for d owner eh
Poor man wey tief magi
Omo na him dem go show
e face for crime fighter
Rich man wey tief money
Omo we ne dey see dem
face for crime fighter.

In the above song, the musician views hunger, poverty, and deprivation as tools, which are constantly used by the oppressors to put the masses in constant check. While the society is engrossed with corrupt politicians who fatten their foreign bank accounts at the expense of the collective progress of the Nigerian state, the security apparatus in the country only beams their searchlights on members of the oppressed class, who engages in pilfering. The musician, therefore, uses the song not only to parody the hypocrisy in the Nigerian justice system but also to expose the lack of thoughtfulness of the masses, who fail to identify the source of their predicaments. Hence in lines 6-9 the musician highlights the inanity of the Nigerian justice system that exposes any member of the oppressed class for stealing a morsel, while they look away when the corrupt politicians embezzle the collective patrimony of the people. The musician goes further in the song to expose more degrading plight of the populace thus:

Everybody just dey ala
light no dey
How we wan survive
We be giant of Africa but
to get visa
Enter Ghana na WAEC
Mr president
Lead us well
If you governor

Govern us well
If you be senator
Senate am well
If you be police
Police well well
No dey take bribe.

The above lines lament the pathetic conditions of the people, as orchestrated by poor political leadership – military and civilian. Some of the obvious appearances of bad governance which the people encounter daily are corruption, power outage, insensitivity and political highhandedness. Every regime seems to come with new forms of hardship on the people. The people are like pawns tossed to and fro in the hands of the politicians. The satiric strategy deployed by the musician is remarkable – he mocks the way the political leaders of the country boasts of being the giant of Africa but its citizens are unable to secure positive diplomatic ties with neighbouring African countries. He therefore pleads with them to lead the people well in whatever capacity they find themselves.

A similar theme is also depicted in Idris Abdulkareem's "Jaga Jaga" where the musician, through the manipulation of Nigerian pidgin and theme, ontologises the motif of total collapse of the country's socio-political equilibrium in a manner that the oppressed masses are constantly incited to act and fight their oppressors. In this song, the dichotomy between the bourgeois and the downtrodden are evidently represented. The song reels with gory images of political assassination, poverty and hopelessness. The musician crones:

Nigeria jaga jaga
Everything scatter scatter
Poor man dey suffer suffer
Gbosa! Gbosa!

Gun short in d air.

The issue of social disparity and class discrimination, which manifests in the Nigerian socio-political domains, is depicted in the lyrical lines above. The distinction along class line, in Nigeria, gives rise to exploitation of varying forms. There is failure of social and economic institutions, political rascality among the political players, as well as constant disagreement between the populace and the rulers. Abdulkareem incites the oppressed to react to the disturbing experience of injustice, where resources that are meant to satisfy the needs of all are abrogated by few individuals, who perpetuate themselves in power. They kill and maim perceived enemies without cause. The insensitivity and cruelty of Nigerian political rulers resonate in the following lines:

Armed robber enta your
house
E no take your money
E no rape your wife
Gbosa! Gbosa!!
Which kine armed robber
be dat?
Na political armed robber
be dat!
Na wetin dey kill Nigeria o!

As we learn from the excerpt above, in Nigeria, every new political ruler perpetuates and worsens the people's conditions. Borrowing the words of Achebe, the "trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership" (1). Hence the people are further disillusioned by the fact that they have not yet seen the leader that will save them from their predicaments. This is given the fact that the masses who are burdened by the torment of current political highhandedness are further

exposed to another thoughtless leader, who arises to stiffen the yoke of oppression on them. There seems not to be hope in the near future judging from the manner of political manoeuvring from the political class. This incivility, the musician tells us, is what is killing the country: "Na wetin dey kill Nigeria o!" In other words, both the Nigerian popular musicians and their comedian counterparts understand the level of injustice and class distinction that exist between the elite and the masses in the country. And in order to get their message across to these distinct groups, they must use the language of the common man – the Nigerian pidgin.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussions that the use of the Nigerian pidgin as a medium of communication in many of the songs and stand-up comedy is to accentuate the class of the people that the artists want to connect with. In other words, by the artists use of this linguistic medium and impressive techniques, they have succeeded in extending, howbeit logically, a national consciousness that brings together both the haves and have-nots, the oppressed and oppressors, the master and slaves in one artistic conundrum – a national consciousness that propagates, through themes that revolve around hilarious events that the generality of the populace can identify with.

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