Exalted madness: Interrogating the paradox of lunacy and fame in Akpororo’s stand-up comedy

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Abstract
Most celebrated artistic works ranging from literary, visual and performing arts in the world history reflect both the nature of the conscious and unconscious processes which manifest in individual’s mental and social activities. This is because moments of intense artistic meditations and creation have profound impacts on the mindscape. Absurdly, features of lunacy which are evident in the art of creation or performances are dignified as a reflection of artistic perfection. This article examines the paradox of exalted madness in selected comic performances of Jephthah Bowoto (Akpororo), one of Nigeria’s most celebrated Stand-Up Comedians. The analysis explores psychiatric episodes from the gait, utterances and physical dispositions of the performer, foregrounding the thin line between genius arts and psychosis. The researcher relies on Akpororo’s comedy series in YouTube, which are transcribed and analysed, bringing to the fore, indices of deviation from normal mental composition. Effort is also made to examine the socioeconomic factor that engenders such radical drift from normal human behaviours as evident in the comic performances of the aforementioned Stand-Up Comedian. The analytical content relies on the psychoanalytic theory which helps to penetrate the inner-life of the character or performer. Besides the humour embedded in the selected comedic performances, the researcher argues that such mock-madness is an indication of how poverty does intense blow on the individual’s mentation, stressing that s/he could employ every mental resources to attain prosperity and fame. This rare energy and deviation from the norms of mental composition as a means of navigating the route of success and fame constitutes the examined paradox in this article.

Keywords: Stand-up comedy, exalted madness, psychopathology, paradox, Nigeria, Akpororo

Introduction
Globalisation and the current application of the new media technologies to foreground human collective experiences have given a new dimension to the literary and artistic culture. Popular or mass culture such as music, jokes and filmic performances are informed by the advent of the new media which are aimed at communicating to a large audience— both literate and the illiterate persons (Okuyade, 2012 & McGaha, 2016). In such artistic traditions, one encounters characteristic intuitive displays which discard conventional logic, reason and conducts. Evidently, creative art is one of the most mentally tasking ventures in the world. Since the writer or the artist-performer is faced with the task of communicating a message that will be both exhilarating and educative, s/he is engaged in intense artistic meditation which makes him/her drift from social conformity and the norm of human behaviour and reason. This, over the years, has been acclaimed as the postmodernist making of a genius art. Simply put, most celebrated literary works are the ones that deploy strange philosophical dictums and magical narrative cadence laced with surrealist expressions. Perhaps, it takes a work of art to be “mad” to gain social applause. From Beckett to Okri, we notice the appropriation of ‘postmodernist madness’ to demonstrate a rare artistry and intellectuality. Based on the surrealist and absurdist logic in such works, the authors are acclaimed as uncommon philosophers who speak directly to the human’s mind.

Stand-up comedy in Nigeria is acclaimed as one of the most regenerative
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arts in the 21st century. It is a sustaining career for many young people, who might have been devastated by economic recession. Stand-up comedy is a humorous or comic art in which artist-performers, known as comedians, perform to thrill a live audience. The stand-up comic or stand-up comedian deploys different incidents and accounts such as jokes, music, magic tricks and effective narrative strategies to entertain the audience. The stand-up comedy genre which began in the 18th and 19th centuries in the UK has become a very productive tradition in Nigeria with obvious psycho-social and economic relevance. The emergence of the stand-up comedy genre in the 20th century in Nigeria is traced to Ali Baba, a 1990 graduate of Religious Studies/Philosophy from Bendel State University (now Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma), who did his first show in 1988 at the pavilion of BENSU (Ayakoroma, 2013). The next generations of comedians are made up of the following artistes: I Go Die, Julius Agwu, Basket Mouth, Francis Duru, AY, Bovi, I Go Save, Gordons, Maleke, Gandoki, Akpororo, Elenu, Klint de Drunk, Okey Bakassi and many more established and emerging comedians. The Nigerian Stand-up comedian philosophically weaves absurd situations and episodes to entertain the audience.

Perhaps, the depiction of lunacy through the artistic culture is traced to the 20th century. Modernist reality is the absurd artistic recreation of the mental and moral dislocation that characterised the tragic world of modernism. No wonder, Sass illustrates that, “schizophrenia bears a remarkable resemblance to much of the most sophisticated art, literature and thought of the twentieth century, the epoch of modernism” (Sass, 16). Like Sass, Oyebode also observes the modernist artistic appropriation of madness when he avows that: “the 20th century saw the emergence of individuals who appeared to have multiple personalities, a condition that challenges our natural intuitions about the unity of the self” (83). However, in the Renaissance era, Shakespeare deploys many fools and clowns in his plays whose conducts and utterances are incongruous. This is evident in Salkeld’s (1993) study on the appropriation of madness in Renaissance drama, particularly, in the works of Shakespeare.

Therefore, one of the ways of conveying social and artistic reality is the artist’s mimicking of mental episodes to stimulate humour to the audience. Thus, the artist or performer exhibits lunatic features in the act of performance. Perhaps, the greatest artistic celebration of lunacy is done through the art of stand-up comedy. This is owing to the irrational manifestations by the comic performer to entertain the audience. This article examines Akpororo’s lunatic displays which are regaled as evidence of his artistic energies. It is wise to note here that stand-up comedy falls within the domains of narrative and dramatic literature. This is because the stand-up comedian deploys the resources of telling and that of enactment which makes the art a dual culture.

A number of scholars have acknowledged the appropriation of madness in literature and this falls within the ambit of literature and psychiatry. For some decades now, literature and the humanities have continued to maintain a healthy interaction with medicine (Rousseau, 1986; Evans, 2002, 2009; Veit-Wild, 2006; Omobowale, 2008, Oyebode, 2009, Owonibi, 2010 and Kekeghe, 2018). As a subspecialty of the medical humanities, literature and psychiatry has evolved as a viable discipline aimed at interrogating mental disorders in literature (Oyebode, 2009, 2012 & O’Malley, 2000). Psychiatry is a medical forte that focuses on the diagnosis, analysis and cure of varying mental maladies which are found within the domains of the affective, behavioural, cognitive and
perceptual features (Mbanefo, 1991; O’Malley, 2000; Oyebode, 2009; & Olatawura, 2008). As it is in the lettered industry so it is in the performance industry. Popular culture such as filming, singing, and stand-up comedy make use of the resources of intense imagination and creation which involve a lot of impulsivity and intuition. Such mental features are adored as the liveliness of the muse that inspires the artist in the arena of performance.

The exaltation of madness has intentionally or instinctively become a locus point in our creative consciousness. Psychoanalysis is employed to assess the relationship between the performer’s mindscape and his creative expression. Apparently, psychoanalysis is a viable orientation to examine how the mental state of the artist is foregrounded in his artistic expression (Eagleton, 1983; Barry, 1995 & Dobie, 2002). Since the job of the stand-up comedians is to amuse the audience, they engage in irrational but hilarious displays. Obviously, it is a mentally taxing undertaking to make people laugh away their angst and despair. Thus, it is a constant training for the comic artist to drift people’s minds from horrid memories, and this makes him/her to engage in extreme ruminations that transcend the physical to meta-physical logic. Evidently, the artist exhibits traits that characterise mental abnormalities which are taken to the realm of entertainment and artistic fame. The absurd demonstration of the stand-up comedian in the showground is evident in his gait, conduct, utterances, body texture and dress. The above features, which constitute the major focus of the psychiatrist, are deployed in the comedic art as a substantiation of a creative masterpiece. According to Femi Oyebode, conduct, bodily posture, gait, gestures, and facial expressiveness, language and dress are some of the ways that are used to communicate madness to the audience...psychiatry is principally concerned with careful observation of conduct, posture, gait, gestures, and language among other things. the mis-said and mis-heard are part of the stock in trade of psychiatry (vi).

Akpororo appeals to us as a dual personality— he is the creator of different fabulously absurd narratives as well as the central character and the actor in such accounts. Thus, we are exposed to the art of invention and enactment which constitute the index point of Akpororo’s stand-up comedy. Besides inventing “mad” stories, Akpororo’s impersonation of lunatic characters in his electrifying performances confirms his systematic exaltation of madness. It is this artistic and economic importance of madness that engendered this article which investigates irrational utterance and conducts in selected comic-art of Akpororo in YouTube.

Artistic Exaltation of Madness in Akpororo’s Comic Performances
Born and bred in Warri, Delta State, Jephthah Bowoto (Akpororo) hails from Ilaje, Ondo State, Nigeria. He started his career as a local gospel musician until in 2008 when he went into the National Comedy Challenge by Opa Williams, winning the Calabar zone of the competition. Akpororo showed a resilient spirit and determination to excel in the art of Stand-up comedy when in 2009 he moved to Lagos and contested twice in the AY’s Open Mic Challenge, coming second in his first
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try and winning the competition in his second try. Since then, Akpororo has established himself as a creative comedian. However, he rose to popularity in 2013 following his performance at Basket Mouth’s Laff Jamb. Since then, he has featured prominently in different comedy shows, including AY-Live. On 12 August 2014, he launched his first major comedy show, Akpororo vs Akpororo, a maiden event which witnessed notable musical acts and comedians. In 2014, Akpororo delved into acting, starring in the films, Headgone and The Antique; the former earned him three nominations at the 2015 Golden Icons Academy.

In most of Akpororo’s comic performances, he employs narrative accounts that border on experiences of lunacy. Though some of such narratives are exaggerated to stimulate humour, one is marvelled at Akpororo’s faithful mimicking and dramatisation of such psychiatric episodes on stage. From his utterances, gait, body composition, and conduct, we see him as the very lunatic character he is impersonating. His frequent reference to the mad and his appropriate representation of such mental symptoms shows the quality of the artist he is. In an interview titled “My Former Liaison with Lunatics Inspired My Jokes”, Akpororo notes that his featuring of mad scenes and accounts in his comic narratives is not coincidental. He reveals that he cracks jokes about lunatics because he was once an attendant to mentally ill people who came to receive spiritual healing in the church where he was a worker. While we forbid the lunacy outside, Akpororo’s artistic lunacy is exalted as an evidence of genius art.

In Acapella’s Comey Goes to Church (2014), most of the comic narratives deployed by Akpororo witness the mimicking of lunatic behaviours. At one point, he regards himself as mad; and that he refuses to be well inasmuch as the madness offers him good economic fortune. Hilariously, he advises people who are well but poor to toe the path of lunacy like him so that they may make wealth for themselves. He narrates:

People say I don crase. Pastors, na my fault? (He turns to the resident Pastor among the audience). I normal since, money I no get. E no better say make I crase? (Laughter) I crase now, I dey get money, you say make I normal. Even God know say I no go normal. That prayer point no even dey my dictionary. I dey tell you. In case you don normal for years, money you no get, crase!

As a comic character and performer at the same time, Akpororo constantly deviates from the norm of rational conducts to make a humorous stimulation of the audience. As in the excerpt above, Akpororo amuses the audience by admitting that he is mentally sick; he illustrates further that his artistic fame is triggered by his radical dissociation from rational human conducts. Scholars have attested to the relationship between diseases and creativity. The argument of such thinkers is that mental or physical sicknesses are intensifiers in creative expression. As we have in pathographies and scriptotherapies, mental or physical abnormalities have over times, generated creative consciousness. Sandblom (1989) illustrates that artificial stimulants such as alcohol and hallucinogenic drugs are tonics in creative mentation. In other words, the stimulation of creativity through the consumption of alcohol and drugs heralds a psycho-muse which is needful in the realm of creativity. Thus, one can illustrate that Akpororo deploys different comedic characters that manifest varying lunatic
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conducts as marks of his creative prowess. His ability to perfectly interpret and demonstrate the insanity of the imagined characters makes Akpororo a brilliant artist-comedian. In other words, Akpororo consciously wears the mask of psychosis to attain the status of a genius artist. Furthermore, in one of his narrative episodes in Akpororo Live, 2016, he recounts how his persistent exhibition of madness has made him famous:

Before now, we dey enter Okada, but today now, we come here with a Range Rover (applause). I don tell you before. I no need to preach to you before you know say God dey because I’m a living testimony. No be joke. If God go fit bless me, he go bless everybody be that.

Thus, when Akpororo mounts the stage, he displays a characteristic disorganisation which is manifest in a meaningless song that is woven in a call and answer process, and the audience is enlivened to respond hilariously to his performance:

Akpororo (Call): yegheyegheyogho
Answer: Oyoghoyegheyeghe
Akpororo (Call): yegheyegheyogho
Answer: Oyoghoyegheyeghe
Akpororo (Call): yegheyegheyogho
Answer: Oyoghoyegheyeghe

Akpororo’s use of automatised and desocialised language above, attests to the dramatisation of madness. Desocialisation, according to Sass, is “the failure to monitor one’s speech in accordance with social requirements of conversations” (177). Automatisaton on the other hand, is a schizophrenic art which involves the deployment of “irrelevant semantic connotations of one’s words” (Sass, 178). Obviously, in the excerpt above, meaning is slurred out of existence. This is the characteristic language of the schizophrenic which is now taken to the sphere of artistic rejuvenation. Besides, Akpororo’s dancing steps and physical conducts foreground a radical dissociation from social decorum. With one large towel dangling from his pocket, falling below the knees of his “lowaisted” trousers, and his imbecilic repositioning of his face confirm his dramatisation of manic mood and behaviours such as impulsivity, grandiosity and cognitive feature such as racing thoughts. Thus, we notice that while Akpororo impersonates different characters in his comic narratives, his thoughts constantly drift from one episodic account to the other which is as a result of his obsession with the art of comedy. As revealed above, his acting of madness on stage must have been informed by his close observation of lunatics.

All other episodes that dominate his narrative on Akpororo Live, 2016 are obvious lunatic conditions. In one of such telling, he recounts the recent Marathon race in Lagos which was won by Kenyan and Ethiopian participants. He therefore adds his own intense imagination of a fabulous account to stimulate humour. He goes on to narrate a particular Marathon race in Okoko which was won by 105 years old woman, believed to have used charms to suppress her opponents by making them go mad and float from the activity of running. He recounts:

The first Marathon wey dem do for Okoko, na two hundred people run. At the end, 220 crase. Where the 20 take join we no know. 82 years old woman
followed the marathon from start to the end… Another one wey dem do for Okoko so, 105 na im be the woman. Na she win am. Ask me how she take win am. The Mama hold stick dey waka for front (Displays), people dey waka for back (displays). Nobody fit pass. Okoko! You know Okoko? Yoruba women from Ijebu. When she hold her stick dey go (chants Yoruba words), nobody pass am o. So I just dey imagine. To say proper Ijebu man follow these ones run, that Ethiopia guy way dey for front (displays), the Ijebu guy dey for back (chants Yoruba words), she go come front. That one go just face Ore (displays, suggesting madness).

Okoko or Okokomaiko is a major setting in Akpororo’s comic narratives. Here, Akpororo implies that the old athlete uses charms to make the other runners mad; and they instinctively drift from the race into absurdity. Besides the imaginative narrative of lunatic episodes, Akpororo’s evident acting of psychosis shows that he consciously or unconsciously glorifies madness. Another episode is a mockery of those that consume hallucinogenic drugs. Akpororo says that such drugs trigger psychosis. He recounts:

God no create us to dey smoke. If to say he create us to dey smoke, we for get exhaust for the back of our head. If you look your neighbour’s back now, there is no exhaust. So you no need am. Igbo no good. Na so one guy smoke. As he draw am (displaying verbal and physical dissociation from reality). Pata pata ha. His head knock. You know say if person won crase, na laugh he first dey laugh (He displays madness from gaits, conducts and utterances).

Here, he ridicules the consumption of hallucinogenic drugs which are capable of eliciting psychotic episodes. Besides the telling or explicit method of characterisation, Akpororo employs the action method. It is the action or showing method that reinforces the telling method. Thus, the conveyance of lunatic encounters is convincingly done through the action method. If Akpororo mimics a mad character, he convinces the audience on the level of such lunacy— whether it is a schizophrenic psychosis or a depressive or anxiety neurosis. Akpororo’s recounting and acting of different psychiatric episodes is foregrounded below:

If you get friend wey dey do like this (springs his hand epileptically), carry am com give pastor. Three days naim we give am. She go soon crase. The sign wey you need to know… if you know
anybody wey dey read newspaper like this (makes a strange and an abnormal display of facial expression that characterise mental patient), chain am before you bring am come meet Pastor. Chain the two legs, chain the two hands. Two days, he don crase. If you get friend wey dey waka, only am dey talk (displays hilariously), my brother, call doctor. Na them go come carry dat one.

At this point, we notice the various satiric strategies deployed by Akpororo to parody the excesses of human behaviours and utterances. Such displays of extreme and irrational conducts are triggered by anxiety and anger neuroses. Furthermore, Akpororo mimics the illogical utterances of football fans at the vendor stand who unconsciously demonstrate as if they are on the field of play. Akpororo regards such manifestations as drifting into madness. He also impersonates a character in Okoko who shouted carelessly, and when he was cautioned, he said he was not shouting. That could be deconstructed as thought-broadcast which is a schizophrenic symptom. We are further exposed to other exaggerative displays of madness in Okoko— a man removes his eyeball, cleans it with fuel and fixes it back; another removes his tongue. These are absurd imaginative accounts that transcend social reality. Arguably, such fabulous narratives can be deconstructed as lunatic behaviours. All these lunatic and abnormal expressions are found in Akpororo Live, 2016. The way Akpororo unmistakably impersonates the mad situations in all of these lunatic episodes shows his brilliance in the business of stand-up comedy.

In “Akpororo Goes Naked on Stage” we encounter different episodes that convey madness on stage. This display of lunacy is reinforced by Akpororo’s bareness of his body. From his gait, body texture, utterances and conducts, one encounters madness that is taken to the realm of entertainment. In the first episode in the narrative, he foregrounds the glorifying of madness as manifest in the publicisation of nakedness which now pervades performance rituals in Nigeria and the world over. He starts by ridiculing what he sees as a display of lunacy in the music of Iyanya which has earned him a swollen status as a star. Akpororo who wonders why the audience applauds madness swears to go naked like Iyanya as evident in his “Your Waist” album:

The main reason wey I dey dress like this because me and musicians get beef. I tell them say anything wey dem wear, I go wear. If Iyanya dey sing “all I want is your waist”, he go wine waist, he go come pull clothes. You go see six packs. People go dey shout, hala! I ready (Pulls his shirt). If na six packs dey make his music dey sweet, today, six packs go make my hustle sweet (He displays with his bare body).

The public display of nakedness is common among patients of catatonic schizophrenia whose psychotic states are regarded as severe. Thus, Akpororo’s demonstration above prepares the mood of the audience for the psychotic tempers that dominate his narrative accounts. In another comic episode, he imagines a situation where Nigeria has a five thousand naira note and how hurtful and mentally devastating if someone whose entire salary is five thousand naira loses it. Therefore, he imagines a young man who just receives a five thousand naira salary contained in one note; and on his way home, pick-pocket stole it while struggling to board a bus to his
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destination, only to realise at the point of paying the conductor. He therefore envisions the mental disturbance which this experience may engender on the imagined character such as cognitive and dysphoric symptoms that are signalled by self-talk, racy thoughts, distractibility and disorganisation. The way Akpororo dramatises his imagination convinces the reader that he perfectly wears the mask of lunacy. This further attests to the fact that his body is bare. He narrates:

Government say them won bring five thousand naira notes. How many of ona know about am? Five thousand! One note, Five thousand naira. You dey work, your salary na five thousand naira. Month end, them give you one note. As you collect am dey go house, you reach CMS dey drag bus (demonstrates with his bare-body hilariously) pocket picker come thief the five thousand naira note. (Sits, mimicking a passenger in a bus with his bare body), conductor ask you for money, you abuse am (demonstrates with abusive Yoruba utterances). You put your hand inside your pocket (demonstrates), your hand no touch am. Only you go come shout, “uhhhh!” you don dey crase. Only you go come down (mimicking the utterances of the imagined character) “I waka come like this” (Displays). “I go bus stop, I drag bus, drag bus, drag bus” (displays). “No, no no no. I waka come”. You don dey crase o. people don dey gather o. you no know o (Making to cry) “I waka come like this. I collect the money from my oga hand. I signed, shukushukushuku” (Bursts into tears)

In AY-Live (2015) Akpororo’s performances are evident manifestations of lunacy. This earns his comic episodes the caption, “Akpororo Has Gone Mad Again”. In one of such imagined accounts, he mimics the mental drifting of his friend whose mindscape is ruined by India hemp (igbo). The way Akpororo dramatises the gradual floating of the character’s mind makes him assume unmistakably, the portrait of a madman:

Na so my guy smoke igbo (demonstrates). He come dey hear sound for his ear. Ta. Ta. Ta…the head knocked, ko (demonstrates fresh madness). Na im he hugs pillar. Na me come call am say “Oghenero, na pillar you hug so-o”. he say, “No. I must eat this bread” (biting the pillar). Igbo na im go make you get mind say you fit trek from here to Asaba. Tell your neighbour say igbo no good.
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Again, in “Prayer Points” one of the comic episodes in AY-Live, Akpororo demonstrates the rare energy and vigor of a madman when he mimics what he regards as the prayer points of some Yoruba people:

People because of the way wey them take dey pray, even we, we no understand am. Only Yoruba man just dey shout: “Oluwa! Oluwa! Oluwa! Eh! Eh! Eh! Baba-o! ah! Oluwa eeh! Baba yeh! Oluwa! Eh! Ah! Oluwa!” (springs his neck violently from left to right) …The main reason wey God no dey bless some Yoruba men, he no know the prayer point. You dey shout Oluwa! Baba! Oluwa! Baba! Wetin be the prayer point? No confuse God.

We are further confronted by such rare display of violent madness when he narrates a story of how someone in the mood of prayers unconsciously gripped an electric wire and was electrocuted. Akpororo is obviously, a good observer of people’s conducts, by deducing their mental states. This might have been informed by his close attendance to psychiatric patients from the religious background. It is noted that Akpororo gives a religious background to mental disorders; hence, he makes series of comments on the need to take mental patients to a religious leader, precisely, a pastor. It is only in few cases that he recognises biomedical knowledge to mental condition. Furthermore, the deployment of exaggerative accounts also foregrounds madness.

Conclusion
The analysis above shows that Akpororo’s attainment of the status of a mega comedian is necessitated by his desocialised and automatised narrative-performances. Obviously, in all his comic displays, he discards the norm of rational conducts and utterances. While he sometimes deliberately deploys such “mad” expressions and behaviours as evidence of his comic style, at other points, he manifests different lunatic features intuitively as a result of his obsession in the art of weaving hilarious narratives. In either of such cases, Akpororo is regaled as a creative comedian and of course, one of the most celebrated in Nigerian comedy industry. It is therefore paradoxical that the madness which dominates the performance rhetoric of Akpororo is reputed as artistic masterpiece, and this has earned him socio-economic fame. In all the comedic episodes examined in this article, one notices Akpororo’s demonstration of the rare energy, gait, conducts and utterances of the lunatic which he takes to the realm of artistic performance. This is regarded as the characteristic artistic commitment of Akpororo as a comic performer. Akpororo’s recurrent admittance that he is “mad” to be famous substantiates this argument. Thus, in Akpororo’s stand-up comedy, madness is exalted as a celebration of artistic masterpiece which further boosts his economic status.

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