From Jagua To Ali Baba: Humour In Contemporary Nigeria

This paper, using data from interviews, newspapers, social media, videos, blogs, and secondary text, argues that there is a flourishing humour industry in Nigeria. It hypothesizes that this industry is the next big thing after Nollywood. The principal explanation being the national fan-base and ubiquitous adulation of such humourpreneurs like Ali Baba, Basketmouth, klint the Drunk, Princess, Julius Agwu, AY, and Okey Bakaasi. So successful have these humour impresarios become, that few will grace a thirty-minute event for less than fifteen thousand dollars. What’s more? They are increasingly in demand in several countries outside Nigeria. However, the situation was not always like this. In the eighties, the superstars of Nigerian clowning, mockery, ridicule and satire included household names like: Jagua, Danjuma, Gringory, Baba Sala, Mr B, Gbenga Adeboye (Funwontan), Aluwe, and Zebrudaya. Twenty years later, virtually all of them were reeling in one strait or the other. Ironically, this was about the same time that the boom in the Nigerian humour landscape- and the likes of Ali Baba with it – was taking off. Today, the metamorphosis to Nigerian humour is such that a successful comedian is another name for a Nigerian elite. What is responsible for this transformation? Are Kieth and Bergen’s theories of an intersection between humour and public opinion, inter alia, applicable to Nigeria? Essentially, this study pioneers the debate about how and why the Nigerian humour industry is where it is presently.

Key words: First Generation Nigerian Comedians, Gringory, Basketmouth, Skits, Teju Baby Face, Endorsement, I go dye, Jagua.

PROLOGUE

Etymologically, the word humour is of Latin origin, and it connotes four fluids- black bile, choler, phlegm, blood- of the body, through which the quality of an individual’s health is determined (Huy Pham, 2014). To the extent that there is equilibrium of these fluids in a person, s/he is considered to be in good humour and thus in excellent health. Humour, for the last two hundred years has remained interchangeable with ideas including laughter, fun, mirth, amusement, comedy, or capacity to engender them. It is frequently descriptive of an action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement. It is usually also illustrative of the combination of oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, and the act of expressing these in speech or writing. Humour, equally, subsists when: specific cognitive experiences elicit amusement or laughter; we identify things to be funny; we experience witty banter, and we perceive information whose design possesses the ability to induce laughter( Huy Pham; Kazarian & Martin, 2004, 210).

Alternatively, humour or comedy is any work of art, or science, embracing, but not restricted to: theatrical entertainment, radio, oratorical rendition, motion picture or television presentation, awash with comic expression of characters and background.

Humour in Africa

There is a sense in which it could be posited that humour, just like laughter, is as old as when civilized man and his habitation of civilized societies emerged. Prehistoric societies, both in Africa and without, as argued by Inegbe, have been observed to feature jesters and clowns, who, operating proto-professionally performed before their patrons, for irregular income (Long, 2015). Moreover, if it is true that man, in different societies, has been earning a degree of living through acts of jesting and clowning, Africa, indeed Nigerian precolonial societies, cannot be an exception. Particularly, given that a humour-free society is yet to be discovered( Gbinije; Billig, 2005,185).
The Pioneer Class

Stand-up comedy, presently, constitutes the most popular type of humour in contemporary Nigeria. Yet, it must be immediately established that, humour has been otherwise categorized as: surreal comedy, theatrical/dramatic comedy, situation comedies (sitcoms), black comedy, parody, topical humour, self-deprecating humour, dry/deadpan humour and slapstick. All of them often defined by- or a combination of - pun, joke, satire, ridicule, and riddle (Kazarian & Martin; Ayakoroma, 2013).

Gbinije & Ayakoroma have traced the early phase in the evolution of comedy, and comedians in Nigeria to the pre-colonial and colonial village spoke-persons. This class of individuals received considerable admiration from the villagers for the comic spectacle they frequently infused into village social events. Many times, the spoke-persons accordingly received gifts from the villagers as form of appreciation. It was not strange ultimately that they increasingly got invitations from their patrons to perform as compères, dishing out rib-cracking jokes, any time such patrons could afford to host them at private ceremonies.

By the 1950s, the first generation of vocational humour performers were already visible in Nigeria. Names that would come to be associated with this generation included Moses Olaia [Baba Sala], Usman Baba Patagi [Samanja], James Iroha[Gringory], Chika Okpala [Zebrudaya], Sunday Omobolanle [PapiLwe/Aluwe], Afolabi Afolayan [Jagua], Kayode Olaiy [Aderupoko], Tajudeen Gbadamosi [Jacob], and Papa Lolo [Ayo Gunshina] (Ijalana, 2010; Olonilua, 2011; Dede, 2014; Haynes, 1994; Ezebuo, 1994). There is reason to believe that these individuals had impressive following up until 1990, theatre performances (both stationery and travelling) constituting launching-pads for the emergence of their comic artistry (Haynes, 1994). Indeed, the stationery theatre/stage, itinerant stage and, much later, television shows remained the critical outlets through which these pioneers delivered their artistry and comic dexterity (to fans) for much of the seventies and early eighties. Television shows-including a few films-would even then become their overwhelming outlet from the late eighties. In all, dramas, musical dramas and pantomimes, characterized many of their appearances (Haynes). A few of the appellations with which these theatrical and television productions were captured is worth recollecting: the Jestern International of Papa lolo, Aderupoko and Jacob; the Moses Olaia International Alawada Theatre Limited, created by Baba Sala and subordinates in 1969; the Awada Kerikeri; as well as the New Masquerade that revolved around Zebrudaya and Gringory and which aired on Nigerian television between 1983 to 1993.

It is remarkable that, for this pioneer generation, the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s were years in which their comic performances attracted for them insignificant financial return. If Ali Baba’s reflection is anything to go by, this represents a situation wherein the income from the comic performances of this generation failed to sufficiently cater for all of their needs1. In effect, very little in terms of financial payoff was attained by this crop of comedians from their comic enterprise. It was not unusual therefore that many of them lived in very modest terms. Some, going so far as to support their humour vocation with other enterprises. Baba Sala, for instance, until much later in the seventies, doubled as a sanitary inspector. The eighties also saw some of them operating as compere at events, notably: corporate meetings, launchings, award ceremonies, political campaigns, and birthday ceremonies.

Overall the perception of the cross-section of the Nigerian society vis a vis these generation is divisible in to three strands. First, these personalities, for providing, the much needed comic relief and distraction from serious daily endeavours deserved love and applause. Two, their comic characters constituted imagery and tools for chiding societal deviants. Until the late eighties, when some of them still held sway, it was not uncommon to hear parents or the moralist describing a supposed erring, inept, foolhardy, or gullible child/individual as Jagua, Gringory, Alawada, Papiolo and the like. In response, it was resultantly, not atypical for individuals so described to protest vigorously of colossal damage to their personality. This, obviously constituting a manifestation of an aspect of Bergson’s theory of humour: wherein humour is considered to be a mechanism for bringing the deviant and eccentric back to line by mocking their peculiarities (Cameron, 1993, 14).

Another overwhelming perception of this generation was that, even though nationally received and applauded, the generality of parents considered it abominable for their wards to follow in their path. As a matter of fact, no child, indeed very few adults, openly aspired to follow their path. For the society intrinsically considered their (comic) enterprise, pastime for the uneducated and the unserious. The foregoing was particularly deep-seated in Nigeria during the 1990s. And it was within this circumstance that the roots of the second generation of Nigerian comedians began to experience shoots.

The Ali Baba Generation

Apart from their more defining features, the list of the second generation of Nigerian comedians is almost an endless one. To a reasonable extent, it includes such indelible names like Yibo Koko, Babatunde Omidina [Baba Suwe], Tony St Iyke, Agoma, John Chukwu, Jude Edesiri Onakpoma (Away Away), Sam Loco MaziMperempe, Gbenga Adeboye , Mohammed Danjuma, Alam Blow, Atunyota Alleylu Akpobomere [Ali Baba], Francis Agoda [I Go Die], Bunmi Davies, Basorge Tariah Junior, Julius Agwu, Nkem Owoh [Osofia], Bolaji Amusan [Latin], Okechukwu Onyegbule [Okey Bakassi], Bright Okpocha [Basket Mouth, Ayo Mkun [AY], Godwin Komone [Gordons], and Tunde Adewale [Tee A].
An analysis of how this generation was able to emerge, before producing the present superstars of Nigerian comedy is revealing. With very few exceptions, there is frequently the observation by many of them of the marginal appearance-opportunities they received at events (discos, and college variety shows) and (producers and presenters of) television and radio shows which were primarily not for comic purposes. They apparently were given the opportunity in the expectation that their performance would inject a casual slant to otherwise serious programs. Charly Boy Show, Friday Night Life, and Night Train, all popular television talk-shows of the nineties, represent just a few of the frequently mentioned ones among these programs. These brief comic performances being arguably a reflection of the still prevailing proto-professional profile of Nigerian comedy and comedians in the early nineties. The degree to which this was the case is observable in the living conditions of the majority of the first generation of Nigerian comedians by this period. Many of them had simply fallen in to dire and lean financial circumstances, indicative of how income from whatever comic performances they were engaged in was not defraying their needs. All that was about to change however.

It was mentioned a little earlier that stand-up comedy is presently the most successful comedy type in Nigeria. Here it is pertinent to add that, it is to this second generation of Nigerian comedians that credit must be ascribed, for the feat. Stand-up comedy is a type of humour in which the inducer of laughter relays, fast-paced, to an audience, a sequence of laughter-stimulating stories, jokes, trick, music, and props (Ayakoroma). Akin Adetunji recalls that the stand-up comedy outlet for which this second generation of Nigerian humourists is notable had become perfected and visible by 1993 (Adetunji, 2013,3). What Adetunji probably meant was that the period marked the irreversible entrenchment of stand-up comedy and this generation in to the popular consciousness of Nigeria. This is further underlined by the arrowheads of the generation-Ali Baba, Basorge Tariah Jnr, Away Away, and Yibo – who themselves trace their earliest stand-up comic performance to 1986/1987 while still undergraduates in the university (Oloniua).

In the same vein, 1995 was a critically significant date in the consolidation of the irreversible ascendency mentioned in the preceding. The year witnessed the first edition of Night of a Thousand Laugh a dedicated live event strictly involving only stand-up performances of comedians. From that year, that event would be staged annually, consequently providing the elaborate platform for many of the second generation Nigerian comedians to perfect their enterprise( Ayakoroma). The ironically comical and accidental character of the evolution Night of a Thousand Laugh is perhaps worth exploration here. In the words of its pioneer, Opa Williams, the trend immediately succeeded his experience at the Orthopaedic Hospital, Igbobi Lagos around 1994/95.

Opa, who as at then was a director in the fledging Nollywood industry, had met a patient, who himself was a Nollywood actor, at the hospital. The actor was receiving treatment for a car crash he had been involved in. But instead of shooting the movie scene that he had gone to the hospital for, Opa and his crew, in order to lighten the mood injured actor, embarked on an almost unending interchange of jokes which got the entire hospital ward , patients and doctor reeling in laughter. Opa Williams is quoted to have made this recollection subsequently: “…when I got home that night...I started to think of how I could use the idea of laughter to achieve something...(Ayakoroma).” A couple of months later, the first edition of Night of a Thousand Laugh became the ultimate product of that reflection(Ayakoroma).

Another principal novelty of this generation is the elevation of Nigerian humour to a much sought-after profession, in terms specifically of the ability of the enterprise to sufficiently provide for the needs, fancies, and vanity of comedians. All this, given that the Ali Baba-generation ushered in an era when patrons and consumers of live comic performances accepted that they had to pay handsomely , not only to laugh, but to view the inducers of laughter perform. According to Ali Baba, that was a height already attained by a considerable number within this generation as at 2010(Ali Baba, 2016).

The intersection between the lifestyle of many in this generation and income from their comic enterprise is worth particular rumination. Their lifestyle certainly stands in stark contrast to the very modest living of members of the first generation of Nigerian comedians that are still alive. Varying reports have it that the highest paid (second generation) comedian in Nigeria charges $20 000 as appearance fee for an event, that usually may not last beyond an hour (Gabriel, 2012). It is calculated that, by 2016 the leading ones perform at least four of this kind of events in a month (Dube, 2016). Remarkably still, the fee charged by the likes of Tee A, Julius Agwu, Basket Mouth, and I Go Die is estimated not to be too distant from the $20 000 figure. But these generation of comedians are also known to earn eye-popping figures from endorsement deals, such as the 240 000 pounds endorsement between Haven Homes and AY; Basketmouth’s over 300 000 pounds endorsement deals, respectively, with Globacom, Virgin Atlantic Nigeria; and Ghenga Adeyinka’s over 450 000 pounds endorsement with the Nigerian Breweries (FinIntell; Ayakoroma) Apparently, this is what is at the heart of the transformation of the Nigerian comedy industry to the touted 125 million pounds market (Oluwadahunsi, 2015; Aderibigbe, 2014).

Further underlining the financial prosperity that this crop of comedians continue to draw from the humour enterprise is the yearly stand-up comedy events organized by a number of them outside Nigeria. For Julius Agwu, London, and the USA appear to have become the premium hosts for his yearly international comedy events. Almost the same can be said for Basketmouth, who every year organizes at least a comedy show in the USA, London and South Africa.
The range of income obtainable by these comedians from these international performances is observable in the sold-out “Nigerian Kings of Comedy” shows organized by Basketmouth at Indigo2, London, and Birdcage, United Kingdom in 2013 (Ayakoroma). Tickets at those shows went for between 25 and 75 pounds. Given the fact that in 2014, tickets for the AY Live comedy event averaged between 20 pounds (single person), 80 pounds (VIP), and 1600 pounds (table for 8), the second generation Nigerian comedians probably earn more from comedy events that they organize within Nigeria (Aderibigbe; Ayakoroma). Yet, when this is situated within the context that AY and Basketmouth draw inspiration and mentorship from the likes of Ali Baba and Julius, income obtainable from tickets for comedy events and endorsements featuring these mentors is any observer’s guess. And Ali Baba gives an inkling: ‘I chose to pursue a career in comedy, which was in contrast to my father’s dream for me. Today, I am a billionaire and I have made people millionaires’ (Fin Intel).

Nothing additionally perhaps underscores the income/lifestyle intersection of this generation of Nigerian comedians than some of their indulgences. For example, some six years ago, I Go Die added three high-end automobiles (a 2012 Cadillac Escalade, Rolls Royce Phantom, and a Range Rover Envogue) to his garage (Aderibigbe) The likes of Julius Agwu, Tee A and AY are also known to maintain automobiles in this class. Besides, Ali Baba’s exotic cars are known to be valued at about a million pounds (Fin Intel). Relatedly rumoured, is the possession of properties worth over a million dollars in some of the highbrow axes of Nigerian cities by each of the arrowheads within this [second] generation(Ajas). Even then, some of their activities give a number of them away as savvy businesspeople. Explanation for this being very well observable in I Go Die’s Revamp Construction Company and Ali Baba’s considerable investments in banking, importation enterprise, relaxation centres, fashion enterprise, and events management (Ajasa).

In all this, the striking observation is the paradoxical interlock between the apparently expanding wealth of this comedians and the continuing plunge in the disposable resources of Nigerians and the Nigerian society. What utility humour presents to the corporate and individual patrons of these humourpreneurs is a natural question flowing from such observation. Do these comedians present any value whatsoever to their consumers?

It is noteworthy that the content of the performance of the second generation Nigerians is illustrative of inclination towards a plurality of goals. Disparagement is one significant motivation of a number of the content (Olomilua). The theory of disparagement presupposes that humour must serve the ends of control, censure and criticism. Present in this kind of humour scenario is the inducer of laughter, the victim, and the audience of the comedian (Billig, 2004). Not only do the performances of many of these comedians align with the disparagement (or degradation/superiority theory) they also pander randomly to the incongruity, release, and Bergson’s inflexibility/rigidity/mechanical theories with which humour is frequently explained (Billig, 2004, 38, 110-131). While incongruity theory presupposes that laughter is catalyzed by the perception of the absurd, the inflexibility theory posit that laughter, by implication, is specifically an outcome of perception of not only the rigidity in the general behavior of human beings, but also the rigid aspect of observed absurdity of man (Billig, 39, 83). And these are all qualities that the comic performances of contemporary Nigerian comedians are oriented around.

The Third Generation of Nigerian Comedians

Talking about contemporary Nigerian comedians, no discussion of the country’s contemporary comedy scene can be said to have begun without a mention of the burgeoning third generation of comedians in Nigeria. As a matter fact, it is to this generation that the credit or blame must go for the slowly evolving evangelical angle of Nigerian comedy (Idahosa; Augoye, Adebesin). This refers to the engagement of the services of comedians considered here to be under the third generation (of Nigerian comedians) by a growing number of new generation penticostical churches, in a bid to attract converts(Idahosa; Augoye, Adebesin). While the controversy that this novelty continues to generate is still raging, prominent names in this generation include Seyi Law, Gbenga Adeyinka, Teju Oyelakin (Babyface), Omo Baba, Gondki, I Go Save, Princess, Lolo, Lepacious, Bose, Helen Paul, Aboki4Christ and Akpororo . To be sure, the generation’s evolution is traceable to the direct and remote mentorship of those in the second generation (Aderibigbe; Gabriel). It suffices that a number of those in this generation recorded there emergence, not ascendency, at the same period when elements in the second generation were either still on the rise or consolidating their ascendency. Many of these prominent third generation comedians can be presently observed to match their successful second generation mentors in terms of flamboyance and income. Many, yet, continue to join the army of third generation Nigerian comedians, using in particular the internet to deliver their hilarious content while at the same time forcing the members of the second generation to extend their presence to this medium.

The latest sensation in this third generation is a teenage girl called Emmanuela. Emmanuela is popular for her comic uploads (skits) particularly on Facebook. It remains to be seen whether she will be able to convert this to the kind of income common with the arrowheads of the second generation of Nigerian comedians.

Two critical speculations are already developing from the activities of budding Nigerians in this third generation. The first is that the generations of Nigerian comedians before them would have to move most of their activities to the internet, if they are to remain relevant in the medium and long term. The second is that the use of the internet especially by the third generation-including the
free access to comic performances-it gives to patrons would ultimately lead to the eclipse of the prominence of the arrowheads of the second generation, by individuals like Emmanuela. Whether this will ultimately turn out to be so remains a conclusion no one can support with certainty.

Conclusion

The overarching purpose of this paper is to stimulate serious debate on Nigeria’s fledging comedy industry. The paper’s fundamental proposition is that so far, the primary actors in this industry can be divided into three generations. The runaway financial success of Nigerian comedians in the second generation is attributed by this paper to recognition by patrons and comedy consumers that comedians had to be handsomely paid to be watched. Given the immense fixation on societal recognition and the class obsession in Nigeria, both of which have come to be increasingly fed by the related status symbol obtainable from the performance of comedians at selected events, it is hard to foreclose the expansion of that financial success.

A third generation of Nigerian comedians is advanced by the paper to be emerging, one particularly riding on the ubiquity of the internet

(Endnotes)

‘Dialogue with Ali Baba. 24 April April. At Lambo Lambo, Outside Olabisis Onabanjo University, Ag Iwoye Ogun State, Nigeria.

References


