

Laughter as Good Medicine: A Balanced Overview of the Comedy Industry in Nigeria 1960-2020.

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a balanced overview of the role of laughter in Nigerian society, with a particular focus on the comedy industry from 1960 to 2020. The study examines the different reasons for human laughter and their cultural, social, and religious contexts. The findings demonstrate that laughter has numerous positive impacts on physical and mental health, including releasing endorphins and reducing stress and blood pressure. However, the paper also highlights the negative use of laughter as a tool for ridicule and harm, particularly in the context of social media and the treatment of celebrities and individuals who do not conform to societal standards. Secondary sources were used in the course of the study. The conclusion emphasizes the importance of considering the context and impact of laughter, and the need for greater awareness of the harmful effects of laughing at others.

Keywords: Laughter, Scorn, Ridicule, Humour, Comedy.

Introduction

In historical-based research and in dealing with a subject matter in History, it is important to identify and trace the origin of the subject matter. The question can thus be asked, as to what the origin of Laughter is. This research will begin with the origins of laughter according to Judeo-Christian tradition before examining the biological and medical origins of laughter. According to the Bible and as believed by billions in the world, in the beginning, God created the Heavens and the earth and also created man in his image. The Bible records in Psalm 2 that he that sits in heaven shall laugh (God). God laughs therefore it is logical that man created in his image should also laugh. As recorded in the Bible, God's laughter was usually to express consternation at the feeble attempts of his creation at resisting his will and counsel. A well-known example of someone laughing in the Bible is recorded in Genesis Ch. 18 vs.12 where Sarah, who was well stricken in age laughed when the Angels brought her counsel that she would conceive and bear a son. In context, she laughed in amusement and unbelief at such a bold expression of the almighty's ability to help her conceive despite her obvious biological

circumstances. When she conceived and bore a son a year later, she named him Isaac, stating that God had made her laugh.

In biology and medicine, laughter is usually an expression of amusement, excitement, happiness, joy, ecstasy or a reaction to being fascinated by something humorous. Human beings also laugh in defiance or ridicule and scorn someone. Thus depending on a person's genetic and biological character, certain actions can trigger a laughing response. Some queer individuals have been recorded as laughing in glee when something destructive or harmful happened to someone else. Such individuals are often termed or described as sadistic people. Among Nigerian students, it is commonplace to hear students call a lecturer a sadist. Laughter in biology can hence be seen as a neurological response triggered by certain actions or circumstances. Hearty laughter is often encouraged by professionals in the medical profession because it has amazing healing benefits. Generally, people are drawn to cheerful, laughing and smiling individuals as long as that individual is not lousy. This is why individuals constantly seek out humorous entertainment and at times pay expensive gate fees to access such entertainment. In Nigeria for instance, there is an ever-increasing comedy industry with a variety of shows and comedians tailored to meet different tastes and needs. Perhaps the oldest popularly known comedian in Nigerian media was Jaguar of the '70s comedy series. Every evening, families would gather in front of their television sets to watch Jaguar and his antics. There was also Chief Zebrudaya, Clarus and Natty of the New Masquerade series. The subscription and endorsement of these humorous shows by teeming viewers sent a signal to the media industry that indeed there was a demand for comedy, humour and wit.

In every subsequent generation, star comedian actors were committed to bringing fun and excitement to expectant viewers. With the emergence and expansion of the Nollywood Industry (a name for the Nigerian film industry akin to Hollywood and Bollywood) a new crop of actors emerged with popular nicknames adapted from some of their popular movies. Actors like Nkem Owoh (Ukwa), (Akin), Osita Ihedozie (Paw Paw), Patience Uzokwor (Mama G), (Mr Ibu), Okey Bakassi were the pioneers of the Nigerian Comedy genre in movies that thrilled Nigerian audiences with a peculiar blend of uniquely Nigerian comedy. It is important to note that perhaps because most of the major promoters of Nigerian movies were of Igbo extraction, the initial movies often included rituals, cultism, moneymaking, sorcery, witchcraft, divination, gangsterism, rags to riches stories, high-powered occultism and indeed everything negative about Nigerian society. While these movies were revelatory, they did not provide wholesome entertainment and had the unintended consequence of throwing people into paranoia. It is interesting to note that from about 2010, such movies were gradually phased out and relegated to those who deliberately sought vernacular entertainment. There was, from about 2010, a deliberate imitation of Western Media and this imitation has birthed balanced and wholesome shows like MY SIBLINGS AND I, FLATMATES and THE JOHNSONS. These shows are the form of popular syndicated Western Sitcoms like TWO AND A HALF MEN, THE FRESH PRINCE OF BEL AIR, THE ROCK and F.R.I.E.N.D.S.

The early 2000s also saw the emergence of stand-up comedy and the outstanding Pioneer was Alibaba. Individuals began to gather for shows and events committed to making people laugh. One of the most popular shows in the early 2000s that took the Stand-Up comedy world in Nigeria by storm was “A Night of a Thousand Laughs”. Gifted Stand-up comedians like Basket Mouth, I go Die, Gordons, Okey Bakassi and many others began to emerge and the demand for their peculiar brand of Nigerian humour usually delivered in pidgin English led to rising appearance fees and saw the emergence of many others. Stand Up comedy was a big hit with Nigerians and led many a young gifted student to aspire to become a comedian. Apart from the laughing, giggling and jokes, there was a gradual realization that comedy was a way to ease the stress from a highly charged, high-octane Nigerian environment. There was also a realization that indeed laughter is good medicine as espoused in the Holy Scriptures centuries ago.

Theoretical Framework

According to Abend, (2008), as quoted in Akoda, (2017) “Theories are formulated to explain, predict and understand phenomena and in many areas, to challenge and extend existing knowledge within the limits of critical bounding assumption. Okpeh, Jr maintains that” It is, therefore, of utmost importance for any researcher to, first of all, establish the central concepts or theories regarding the subject matter before plunging into the shifting sands of interpretation.”. It is thus expedient in a research undertaking such as this to lay the basic theoretical framework of laughter as a means of expression among the human species. Laughter indeed is as old as man thus there are several theories on the origin, use and functionality of humour. The three main theories that explain the function of humour are the Relief theory, the Incongruity theory and the Superiority theory. Among modern researchers of humour, there is no consensus as to which theory is best suited and best explains the phenomenon of laughter. Thus among scholars, humour or laughing as a phenomenon is usually explained through a combination of all three theories.

In a nutshell, the relief theory states that Laughter is usually expressed among human beings to relieve tension and stress. Today’s world is loaded with tension, pressure and stress and this perhaps explains the ever-increasing need for talented and well-skilled comedians in Nigeria. It was this need to ease the pressure, especially in the courts of Kings that led to early Court jesting. In the lower Cross River region, during the meeting of families to consummate the marriage union traditionally, comedians are usually employed to interject and make an otherwise boring and drawn-out process fun and interesting. Thus it can be stated that the deliberate attempt to seek comic relief has contributed in no small measure to the high-end commercialization and organization of the Comedy Industry in Nigeria. This paper profiles how the search for relief through comedy made the industry a money spinner in Nigeria.

The Incongruity theory states that Laughter is a reaction to absurdity. Part of the training of young children is to know which absurdity to laugh at. A clown uses amusing actions deliberately to provoke laughter, thus, laughter at the antics of a clown is in order. A Hunchback

is also an absurdity but laughter at such a deformed person is usually met with a frown and disapproval. This is because the Hunchback's condition in most cases is by no making of his and the physical deformity is usually a strange burden to him. This Paper addresses the issue of Laughing to scorn and poking fun stating that laughing at absurdity must be done carefully and in the right context.

The Superiority theory states that some people laugh at the misfortune of others usually as a show of superiority. Sadly, this has crept from social gatherings into religious circles with well-known Nigerian scornful clichés like “Na God” and “I’m too favoured for you”. Laughing to scorn as pleasurable as it is to the scornful person usually leaves a sour taste in the mouth of the person being laughed at. It is thus a practice that must be firmly discouraged and punished where possible. This paper addresses the danger and intention behind laughing someone to scorn.

Writers in the comedy industry in Nigeria while presenting their writings have tended to emphasize one theory over the other. It is however the position of this paper that the development and evolution of the Comedy industry in Nigeria in the period under study (1960-2020) can be explained through a combination of the three main theories, The Relief Theory, The Incongruity Theory and the Superiority Theory. This would be in line with the principle of multi-causation in history and indeed present a balanced overview of the Comedy Industry in Nigeria in the period under study.

Laughter as Good Medicine

As earlier enunciated in this work, people laugh when they are amused or when something is humorous. With the discovery in science that laughter has amazing health benefits, people deliberately put themselves in an environment where they can laugh and forget their sorrows. Comedy hence evolved as a means of using laughter to restore the health of the body. The origins of comedy can be traced to ancient Greece. According to Konstantakos,(2003) the very words comic and comedy come from the ancient greek words, Komos and Komoidia. Komos means revel, celebration, and feast with song and dance. Komos was a boisterous and joyous celebration made by banqueters and revellers through the streets of the city. This perhaps is the origin of the “sit-out” culture that has overtaken Nigerian social life. After the Banquet and after they had come to a state of merry exaltation the revellers would exit into the street and go around singing merrily, capering and telling all kinds of jokes. Komoidia, Comedy, was the song of the Komos, the funny and boisterous song that is performed by the revellers.

According to Greek History, Komos and Komoidia were enshrined in Greek culture as a means of supposedly maintaining a balance of body fluids. Incidentally, the word Humour comes from the Latin word humour which means the fluid of the body. Is it any wonder then that hearty laughter is often recommended for those having challenges with high blood pressure? According to Hippocrates the founder of the first and greatest medical School in Ancient Greece, (whose oath is still taken today by Medical Practitioners) the human body is

governed and controlled by four bodily fluids. These fluids are blood, Phlegm, cholera and melancholy. Tim Lahaye the author of the book “Spirit Controlled Temperament” divided the human temperament into four basic types. According to Lahaye, (1992) the four basic human temperaments are Choleric, Melancholy, Phlegmatic and Sanguine. According to Hippocrates, the proponent of this four bodily fluids theory, when these four fluids were in a state of harmony and balance, the body was healthy, happy and free of disease. However, when one of the fluids is more than the others, there is a lack of balance, unhealthiness and disease. Konstantakos notes that one of the ways used by ancient physicians to restore the balance of bodily fluids was precisely laughter.

According to V.A Office of Patient Centered Transformation (1973) in the 1970s, it became common knowledge that Norman Cousins, a journalist had recorded a significant improvement in his symptoms of ankylosing spondylitis, through the use of humour. The humour in Max Brother’s movies watched frequently did a lot to reduce his pain. Proverbs 17 vs. 22 states that a cheerful heart is good medicine but a broken spirit dries up the bones. This could have, like the practices in Ancient Greece been taken to be ancient words of wisdom. The experience with Norman Cousin however gives concrete scientific proof to the statement that indeed laughter is good medicine. Butler, (2005) quotes Dr. William Fry, a scholar from Stanford University who has done extensive research on the Physiological processes that go on when an individual laugh. His works are often cited by people that assert that laughter is like exercising. Dr. Fry in Butler, (2005) states “I believe we do not laugh merely with our lungs and chest muscles or diaphragm or as a result of stimulation of our cardiovascular activity. I believe that we laugh with our whole physical being. I expect that this total participation will eventually be recognized”. He states further that “ it is appropriate to conclude that humour, mirth and laughter are on the side of contributing positively to the maintenance of health and survival, from the standpoint of their psychological effects”.

In the same paper by Butler, (2005) the view of Dr Fry is corroborated by Ronald.A. Berk of John Hopkins University who states that humour causes psychological and physiological effects on our body that can be likened to the health benefits of aerobic exercise. Humour is good for the body. It has great psychological benefits. Humour relieves anxiety, relieves tension in the body, relieves the body of stress, reduces depression, cures loneliness, enhances self-esteem, renews hope and energy and gives a feeling of empowerment and control. There are great physical benefits attributable to humour. These include improving mental functioning, exercising and relaxing muscles, improving respiration, decreasing stress hormones, increasing immune system defences and increasing the production of endorphins. With these numerous scientifically proven health benefits of laughter, it is without doubt that Laughter is indeed good medicine. This perhaps explains the wide acceptance of the Comedy genre in the entertainment industry as opposed to genres like Horror.

Butler, (2005) states further that humour can be regarded as a biological and genetic feature of the human species. Humans are however not alone in the expression of humour as (Gorillas, Orang Utangs and Chimpanzees) show a similar expression through their breath and

respiration when they are tickled which is quite similar to human laughter. In a session by Elaine.M. Lundberg in Butler, (2005) titled Laugh for the health of it, she reported that when humans laugh aloud whether it (is feigned or real), it is done up to twenty times an intense heart workout similar to rowing in a boat for three minutes. In medical practice, humour is known to release positive emotions and increase pain tolerance. Researchers and Nurses all vouch for the healing attributes of humour, wit and laughter. Master giggler is the head of an association known as nurses for laughter and the formation and existence of this organization are proof that Medical science acknowledges the place of Laughter and its therapeutic effect. This acknowledgement is further emphasized by the existence of a Journal of Nursing jocularity. Humour can also be used to cope with difficult times. Dr Fry cites some colleagues who state that Freud indicates in his work humour apart from psychotic and neurotic disorders is a basic tool for coping with the stress and hard difficulty of everyday life. Fela Anikpulakpo Kuti's popular statement in his musical work "Suffering and smiling" can hence be seen in this context.

Laughter in Religion and Culture

Laughter like crying is a basic human emotion and finds expression in almost everything that man does. Laughter finds expression in religion and culture as earlier expressed in this work. In the Christian holy book, the Bible, there are significant examples of people laughing and of God laughing. A notable example is Sarah laughing when Angels gave good tidings that a menopausal woman would put to birth. She laughed at the utter impossibility of the prophecy, humanly speaking and when she was confronted she denied that she had laughed. A year later she gave birth to the Child of promise and named him Isaac meaning, God had made me laugh. All over the World in Christian domains, women are apt to name their long-expected male children Isaac usually as a reaction to scorn from other women.

Another prominent example of laughter that is often used as a biblical lesson that Prophecy should not be despised is the story in 2 Kings Chapter. 7 vs. 20 where the servant of the King laughed at the Prophecy of Elisha that by the same time tomorrow the famine would be over and food would be ridiculously cheap. The King's servant laughed and exclaimed that, even if God were to open the windows of heaven, such a thing would not happen. Elisha responded that he would see the abundance but he would not eat of it. The next day in the frenzy over the abundance that God had provided the Servant who had been instructed to man the gate was crushed to death. The moral lesson from the story is that it is dangerous to despise or take lightly words of prophecy from genuine servants and prophets of God. Many a time, Jesus the Patriarch of modern Christianity rebuked his disciples and those seeking healing and deliverance for their unbelief. Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist was struck dumb for not believing the word of the Angel that Elizabeth his wife who was well stricken in age would conceive and bear a son.

In Psalm Chapter 2. Vs. 1-4 God is recorded as asking why the heathen rage and the people imagine a thing. The Bible records that he that sits in heaven shall laugh and have them in

derision. The implication of that verse of scripture as recorded by King David is that nothing happens on the earth without God's approval as he is all-powerful and totally in charge. This is often an assurance for Christians that as long as they are not living in willful sin and they are standing their ground in faith against the enemy the devil, something good and pleasant will come out of every negative circumstance in their life.

In African culture, laughter is a good and interesting thing. Laughter is expressed to show that an individual was tickled by the joke or the scenario that was being laughed at. From when they are toddlers, Children are however warned against laughing at scenarios that are not funny. The instruction against laughing at what is not funny is usually that, when you laugh at someone's misfortune or calamity, the same thing would usually happen to you. This thought is deeply enshrined in African traditional folklore and thought and is a major reason why Africans try to conceal amusement and ridicule when a person does something mischievous and ridiculous. It is usually in an attempt to avoid harmful and dangerous consequences. Hence in African culture, you are not supposed to laugh when someone dies unexpectedly or when someone falls into grave misfortune. It is also wrong to laugh at sick and disabled people or to laugh at beggars or people with serious deformities. Laughing at the poor is also frowned upon in African culture.

It is also wrong to laugh at parents in African culture. When Parents are ridiculous and funny or when they are not on the same intellectual level as the child, it is wrong in African culture to laugh at and ridicule the parent. When a child is respectful and humble despite ridiculous and uninformed behaviour by the parent, it usually attracts a blessing. Many a time, a child gets into problems in society because he was rude or disrespectful to his parents, an authority figure or an elder in society. Laughter should thus be expressed at something funny, humorous or amusing not at things that are sarcastic and distasteful. This shows that there is no jealousy, resentment or bitterness among the parties involved.

Comedy in Nigeria

Comedy in Nigeria is reasonably well-developed and advanced but not as advanced as Comedy in the Western world. Keen observation has indicated that most of the comedy for public consumption on Television is centred around family life. The family life sitcoms began with Jaguar and Zebrudaya of new masquerade. Jaguar was an old funny man in a village setting and his antics, clumsy behaviour and jokes often left many a Nigerian reeling with laughter. The message was thus passed that laughter and humour can make life interesting and amusing.

The same message is passed across in the new masquerade family series where Chief Zebrudaya runs a home as a middle-class man yet the home is full of fun and laughter. No one was spared in the rib-cracking humour that makes Chief Zebrudaya's home exciting and fun to live in. In the drama, humour was often used to douse tensions caused by personality clashes and lack of money. The home Chief Zebrudaya ran typified a typical Nigerian middle-class home and though not openly expressed, the show passed across a subtle message that, money

is not everything. Those who watched the show realized that with smart organization, creativity and humour, their little income would still be sufficient to cater for their needs. It also passed across a message that the rich and influential are not as happy as people think indicating that money cannot buy happiness. This unwritten message provided happiness and succour to several homes pointing out to large numbers of middle-class Nigerians that they could be the object of envy and admiration by the rich and influential. Other Soap Operas and sitcoms after Jaguar and New Masquerade continued to pass on the same message that life can be interesting with little creativity and effort. The subsequent show and comedy skits would include Papa Ajasco, Checkmate, Fortune, Super Story, After the Storm, Tinsel, The Johnsons, My Flatmates, My Siblings and I, Unbroken and many others too numerous to mention. Interestingly, these shows were usually timed to be presented in the 7 pm -11 pm time belt throughout the week. The timing was deliberate, seeking out a time when all members of the family would be at home sitting around the centre table in the sitting room. Family members could hence have genuine family time around the television set throwing in humorous comments and observations about what tickled their fancy and what taught them a lesson.

Laughing to Scorn

As the statement indicates, the purpose of scornful laughter is to ridicule and embarrass the individual concerned. Sadly, in some African societies such as is common in some Nigerian homes, parents are often guilty of laughing their children to scorn. This has been vividly depicted in several Nigerian Home Videos and as shown by the videos and the painful experiences of many, it has forced a large number of young people into unwholesome and diabolical practices. A typical example would be in a hypothetical movie titled “Mother”. What started as an innocent discussion among two mothers who have male children of the same age. Mama Emeka tells Mama Okafor that Emeka her son sends her One Million Dollars (\$1,000,000.00) every month. She gives this as justification for her slaughtering a cow every week and throwing a party every month. This according to Mama Emeka also explains the expensive wrappers that she ties and the headgear she imports from Europe. Without any form of verification as to the source of such stupendous sums of money, Mama Okafor starts to ridicule and embarrass her son comparing him to his wealthy peer and stating in clear terms that he is a failure. After six gruesome years of emotional abuse, battering and blackmail Okafor decides to head to Abuja to be mentored by Emeka. He discovers much too late that Emeka is an internet fraudster.

The point of this elaboration is clear to any discerning eye. It reveals the grave danger and perhaps one of the intentions of a sarcastic person that laughs people to scorn. This perhaps might be the origin of the contextual use of the word “crack” in the cracking of jokes. One of the readily obvious objectives of laughing a person to scorn is to break down the individual and possibly cause the individual to slump into low self-esteem and depression. A not-so-obvious reason for a scorner laughing at his target to scorn is often to show superiority. Sadly, this superiority is often shown even in things that were freely given by the Creator. You could hear a Father boast and scorn a less fortunate contemporary because all four of his children are

Medical Doctors and none of the contemporary's children could make it into the University. Laughing to scorn should be discouraged at an early age before it forms a habit. These long-term negative consequences perhaps explain why some African Parents are quick to descend on little children when they begin to laugh their peers to scorn.

There is also laughing to scorn recorded in the Bible, the Holy Book of Christians. In Samuel Chapter.1 vs. 5-6, it is recorded that Peninnah the first wife of Elkanah laughed at Hannah to scorn because she had no children. The Bible records that Elkanah tried to console Hannah with gifts but she refused to be consoled. It was this constant scornful laughter that led Hannah to pray and weep uncontrollably at Shiloh. Hannah's weeping was noticed by Eli the priest at Shiloh and he prayed for her that she should conceive a child. Hannah subsequently vowed a vow that if God would give her a male child, she would dedicate him to God and he would serve in the house of God all the days of his life. The prophet Samuel was born a while after and she fulfilled her vow by handing him over to God. Such was the intensity of Peninnah's scornful laughter that it pushed Hannah to uncontrollable weeping. Hannah's song of victory in the Second Chapter of Samuel indicates that according to the Holy Bible, God does indeed fight the cause of the scorned and oppressed.

A Brief History of Comedy in Nigeria

According to Olaseni, (2017) there is a flourishing humour industry in Nigeria. Olaseni proceeds to trace the origins of this humour industry in his paper. He states emphatically that after the Nollywood industry, the Comedy and humour industry is the next big thing. The researcher of this journal article proceeded to embark on a study that perhaps could trace a history of comedy in Nigeria. According to Nwankwo, (2015), comedy in the Nigerian setting predates the arrival of the Europeans. Comedy in its formalized form is perhaps first noticeable in Court jesting and palace comedy during official events. These court jesters provided much-needed comic relief as an interlude during important Palace proceedings. There were professional jesters in the court of almost every significant King or Chief in Nigeria and this comedy proceeded to become an integral part of traditional marriages in almost every part of the country. There is also the practice of ascertaining the groom's intent through the release of false brides before the real bride emerges. The representatives of both families and the Master of Ceremonies at Traditional marriages are usually skilled in traditional wit and wisdom. These traditional representatives and comperes usually exchange jokes, proverbs and sarcastic remarks that make the event interesting and colourful amidst the serious transactions that are taking place.

Such is the demand for these comic comperes in the Lower Cross River Region that the most proficient ones are fully engaged week after week. This hence revealed that Nigerians and indeed people living in the Lower Cross River Region had their peculiar brand of humour and went to reasonable lengths to satisfy this craving for good humour. Sadly, providing this humour did not yield many economic benefits and the humour merchants did it as part-time work usually for recreation and to ease tension. Until the early 2000's comedy was usually

regarded as work for societal misfits and unserious people hence the remuneration for comic hard work was usually very low. This began to change in the early 1990s and the early 2000s largely due to the pioneering work of Alleluya Atunyota Akporobomerere also known as Ali Baba. Alibaba graduated in 1990 having studied Philosophy and Religion at the State University in the former Bendel State University (now Ambrose Ali University Ekpoma). Alibaba is largely credited with professionalizing the comedy industry in Nigeria and insisting that comedy was a respectable profession. The consequence of this painstaking, enlightened pioneering work is the jumbo fees and multi-million endorsements that comedians enjoy today. At the risk of sounding sinister, it can be stated that Alibaba laboriously wove almost all mid-level and upper-level comedians into a hardened cartel with a highly organized way of monitoring and censoring their activities. The consequence of this conscious and deliberate action has been the ever-increasing fees in the Comedy industry.

This pioneering work done by Alibaba was done at great cost and according to Ayakoroma, (2013), shines an illuminating pathway for the declining theatre industry. It is on record that in the Year 1998 Alibaba incorporated a company known as “Hiccupurathird” and also mounted three giant billboards in key locations in Lagos. The billboards were located at Osborne road Ikoyi, Ozumba Mbadiwe Street, Victoria Island and Marina, Lagos and Ali baba paid One hundred and fifty thousand naira (N150,000) per billboard every single year. On the billboards was a simple message: “Alibaba: Being funny is serious business” marking and signalling a complete change in the standup comedy business all over the country. It is often stated in common parlance that a tree cannot make a forest and this was also the case in the comedy industry. As significant as Alibaba’s achievements were, due credit must be directed to Opa Williams for initiating a platform and a pedestal for the growth of standup humour in Nigeria. Ayakorma (2013) states that Opa started his career as a Nollywood director and had quite a number of creditable productions to his name. Opa Williams turned his back on the Nigerian movie industry because of the vice-like grip of the marketers and the influx of quasi-movie directors and producers.

According to Okafor (2013), the idea for Opa’s groundbreaking comedy business was stumbled upon accidentally. It is on record that while shooting a movie scene at the Orthopaedic Hospital, Igbobi, Lagos, he ran into an Actor involved in the Nigerian Movie Industry who was involved in a crash and had been admitted to the hospital. To give the actor a bit of relief through humour, those involved in producing the movie cracked jokes that caused the Nollywood actor to laugh to stupor. After a significant period of rib-cracking jokes, a nurse emerged asking the cast and crew to leave as a doctor would soon arrive for routine treatment. The nurse incidentally, did not realize that the doctor was in the ward enjoying the jokes. The doctor promptly asked the nurse to leave so the jokes could continue to amuse everyone. When Opa got home that night, he reflected on the fact that laughter could be a healing balm and started thinking about how laughter could be used to achieve something positive that could touch lives. It was these altruistic thoughts by Opa Williams after the interesting episode at the

Orthopaedic hospital that gave birth to the much-loved syndicated show “A night of a thousand laughs”.

The Chinese proverb states that the shortest pencil is longer than the longest memory. For the sake of posterity and perhaps to help the curious investigator, a detailed roll call of the pioneers of Stand-Up comedy, past and present, would suffice at this point. There is Alleluya Atunyota Akporobomerere also known as Ali Baba, Bright Okpocha who is also known as Basket Mouth, Lepacious Bose, Princess, Dave Sikpa, Emeka Smith, Onyebuchi Ojieh (Buchi), MC Shakara, Elenu, Holy Malaam, Maleke, Teju Babyface, MC Basket Mouth, Klint De Drunk, Michael Obolosingha, Gordons, MC Abbey, Gandoki, I Go Save, Bovi, I Go Die, Julius Agwu, Ayodeji Makun also known as AY, Yibo Koko, Francis Duru, Junior and Pretty, Sammy Needle, Boma Erokosima, Sam Loco Efe, Okey Bakassi, Mohammed Danjuma. Under the able leadership of Ali Baba, they wielded themselves as a formidable force giving standup comedy a new lease of life in Nigeria. As a result of hard work and diligence, their faces litter the billboards and advertorials in major Nigerian cities, helping them live the life of their dreams. Aside from living the life of their dreams, the success of Alibaba’s post-military rule comedians has seen many young people aspire to be standup comedians.

One factor that is perhaps the reason for the flourishing success of Stand-up Humour all over Nigeria was the transition from democratic rule to civilian government. On the 29th of May 1999, President Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn in as civilian ruler of Nigeria after many years of draconian military rule. Because of the numerous human rights violations under the Military notably under General Sani Abacha, President Olusegun Obasanjo attempted a clean break from the dark years of military rule. Indeed, President Obasanjo’s efforts went beyond a mere clean break, there were deliberate efforts to redeem Nigeria’s battered image on the international scene. The efforts were geared at attracting Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) and much-needed relief from a ridiculous debt overhang. The community of standup comedians was quick to cash in on this new lease of life. Most of the jokes from the early 2000s and even till the date of the publication of this paper centre around government and governance. The stand-up comedians metamorphosed into social critics after the order of the late Fela Anikpulakpo Kuti throwing humorous jibes at every misadventure of the Nigerian Federal Government.

The Comedian as a Social Critic

There is a statement in common parlance that states that evil thrives when good men refuse to speak up. At times, and in most societies, good men refuse to speak up out of fear of tyrants and dictators. The Arts through the ages have however provided a veritable platform for the artist to be a critic in a somewhat satirical manner. One of the best-known artistic satires in Modern literature is “Animal Farm” which takes a jibe at the Russian revolution and the Irony of how the Freedom fighters ended up replicating the same injustice they fought to overthrow. In an age of dictators, it sent a strong but subtle message that inequality is a subtle, undesirable but ever-present feature of human society. This fact was confirmed in the decolonization era

where many African and Latin American freedom fighters ended up transforming themselves into unyielding dictators perpetuating oppression and inequality that was far worse than the ones they fought to overthrow. At face value, *Animal Farm* looks like an allegory about the happenings in the Animal Kingdom. It takes artistic interpretation and appreciation of sarcasm to be able to decipher the author's true intentions. At the same time, the author cannot be prosecuted or indicted as the hard facts are given an artistic interpretation. This is in stark contrast to Walter Rodney's flagship book "*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*". Walter Rodney quite unlike George Orwell states the hard facts about Slavery, Colonialism and Imperialism in a very corrosive and detailed manner leaving little for imagination. This drew the ire of the authorities in his nation and that of some Colonial powers.

Music has proven to be another social tool used to pass strong social messages in any society. Bob Marley, Bob Dylan, Fela Anikpulakpo Kuti, Ras Kimono and Falz the Bad Guy have all proven to be grandmasters in this art. Bob Dylan for one took up the role of a professional legal counsel when he made a bold attempt to plead the cause of the falsely accused and incarcerated boxer, Rubin "The Hurricane" Carter. His activities and those of other social activists led to Rubin Carter's release from prison. Of all the genres of music, reggae has proven to be the most committed to passing social messages across. Indeed, witty, strong social messages have almost become the unwritten signature of reggae music. Thus, along with melodious tunes and danceable beats, a strong social message is passed with the intent of illuminating a particular social problem and possibly causing change.

The same is also true for comedy. Due to the very nature of Comedy and its association with laughter, it is often possible for the skilled comedian to pass on very strong social messages often in the presence of the culpable party. Alibaba in his heydays in the early 2000s was invited as compere for every imaginable Nigerian Federal Government event. Despite the amazing rewards and remuneration Alibaba gleaned from the Federal Government, the main object of his jokes and jesting was the President of the Federal Republic himself, President Olusegun Obasanjo. It is rumoured in social circles that it was the withdrawal from invitations to State functions that made Alibaba back off from Presidential jibes. The point of this elaboration is to show that the skilled comedian is often a veritable social critic. Even in everyday conversation, some statements and conversations could be seen as rude, offensive or out of context if communicated in serious conversations. They can however be easily passed along when spiced with humour and fun.

One segment of society that has often been the butt of jokes by comedians both in theatre and in stand-up comedy has been the clergy. Statistics show that a good 60% of jokes in Nigerian comedy are about fake pastors and their antics. Dr Uduak Udofia of the Intercessors for Nigeria Ministries (IFN) once commented about the relationship between a Minister of the Gospel and his adherents noting that "unquestionable loyalty is witchcraft". This statement revealed the common practice of Pastors especially those of the Pentecostal fold in getting their members into an unquestionable cult-like following. The attendant consequence of the barrage of jokes about fake Pastors, especially their womanizing and money-making antics has been

an increased awareness of the antics of members of the clergy, and increased scrutiny by members before committing to instructions from Men of God. Members of the clergy and their organized bodies are often quick to quote the scripture from Psalm 105 vs. 15 that states “Touch not mine anointed, and do my Prophet no harm”. There is however a concurrent scripture in Ephesians Chapter.5 vs. 11 that states “have no part in the unfruitful works of darkness but rather reprove them”. Could it be the involvement of Pastors in unfruitful works of darkness that opens the door to shame, embarrassment and ridicule by mainline comedians? To put this in context, it has been observed that jokes about the Islamic faith are few and far between.

Another segment of Jokes that is popular among stand-up comics is jokes about good governance and bad governance. Over the years, Nigerian politicians have been known for brazen corruption, impunity, graft and the like. Shockingly, despite their dubious actions that distress the common citizen and leave the treasury empty, they always have the guts and effrontery to seek public office for yet another term. Such is the deep-reaching root of corruption in Nigerian public life that according to www.bbc.com (2016) David Cameron, a high-ranking government official, before the Queen of England while making reference to an Anti-corruption summit in England described Nigerian public office holders as being “Fantastically Corrupt”. Aside from being humorous he was alluding to the fact that notorious fraudsters and embezzlers rather than being seen as outcasts and outlaws are seen as heroes and grand financial patrons. The implication hence is that unless there is drastic intervention by right-standing leadership, the indices of corruption will continue to rise.

There are also jokes about relationships, boyfriends and girlfriends and couples in a marital relationship. This segment of jokes is very popular because of the almost certain shock that usually awaits married couples after the rosy romance of courtship. The jokes range takes swipes about fledging finances, to people who lied about their reproductive capabilities and even those who eventually get exposed as gold diggers and manipulators. Interestingly these are the jokes that tend to evoke the most laughter because in one way or the other everyone can relate. These sets of jokes also reveal people’s weaknesses and flaws that lead to broken down relationships and usually end with jocular rebuke for people to turn towards a good character. When these relationship jokes are delivered by seasoned experts, there is usually an “Aha” moment and truth be told, jokes about relationships have helped many people put their finger on what was wrong with their relationships. The jokes also reveal the pranks and antics of dubious elements, fraudsters and uncommitted partners. For instance, many young men or women now know the popular trick by two-timers of storing a relationship mate’s number as a barber, hairdresser, plumber or carpenter. The purpose of doing this is usually to enjoy financial or sexual benefits from the second or third partner while still maintaining an uninterrupted relationship with the priority partner.

Another interesting comedy segment popular with Nigerian comedians and musicians is the Teacher-student jokes. This perhaps expresses the challenge a lot of Nigerians have with education or to be more specific courses they are not suited for. There is serious neglect of technical education as most Nigerians tend to prefer White collar jobs. Up until recently,

courses of study were usually suggested by parents with students accepting them because of a desire to please their parents. The courses usually suggested were Medicine, Law, Engineering, Accounting, Banking and Finance, Architecture and Economics. These are prestigious courses in African society and hold great prospects for affluence. These courses were sometimes suggested because one of the parents failed at getting admission to study them. From a survey of Comedians that tell these education-based jokes, it is obvious that many a comedian was a victim of course imposition that determined what they studied at the University. Popular in this segment are the “Akpos” jokes in response to seemingly straightforward questions from his teacher.

Comedians take up the role of Social critics all over the world. From Jon Stewart who eventually got featured on the Cable News Network (CNN) to Kevin Hart, Comedians often take the role of social critics deliberating on important life issues. Bonello, et.,al (2018) ask the pertinent question in their paper “Is humour Critique?”. They note that many have long assumed it to be from Heads of State to Government Censors. The Cartoon or Memes section in Newspapers and magazines the world over is usually a favourite because strong messages are usually passed on with humour and wit. They add in their paper on www.bartelby.com that “a group of people sniggering together often seems threatening signifying a kind of anti-social collectivity, a point of view not commonly available, a subverting of the normative stitching of politics. This suggestive conflation underlies the power of the medieval jester, the coyote trickster, the Greek cynic, the literary satirist and in our own time the late-night television comedian, all of whom possess a tremendous power: the ability to say the unsayable, to confront hypocrisy, to kick the pricks”.

In telling these satirical jokes, the interpretation is often left to the audience and like the allegory, *Animal Farm* espoused in this work the intrinsic or underlying meaning of a joke is often left to the discerning eye and ear. Indeed, it is often stated in comic circles that explaining a joke kills the joke. Thus in attending a proper comedy night out, an individual must have his wits with him as grabbing or “getting” the jokes of an expert comedian are often seen as a mark of superior intelligence and class.

According to www.bartleby.com (2018) comedy works at improving society as it “helps shed light on issues that society may see as a taboo or avoid talking about due to controversy”. These issues can however be discussed when laced or spiced with humour. Comedy is hence important as it is an outlet for social issues in society. “Comedians allow these topics to be approached differently since the way they execute these jokes allows for a tension-free atmosphere and makes people more open-minded to the scenarios at play”. Hary (2018) states in an article titled “A serious business: What Comedy can do” the importance of comedy in everyday life and how it can facilitate people coping with tragedy and shed light on important issues. She notes that if executed properly “political comedy when done right is a delivery system for truth”. “Comedians can hence use the forum of humour to transmit to teeming audience issues that are on a front burner in society”.

To his credit, as stated earlier in this work, Alibaba was one of the boldest and bravest in addressing political and social issues through his comedy. In his heyday, a number of his rib-cracking, nail-biting and hair-splinting jokes were delivered in the presence of the Chief Executive, President Olusegun Obasanjo. Alibaba addressed inequality and inequity in society and a particularly warm and well-attended outing delivered a knockout punch on the issue of election rigging in Nigeria. These jokes stated in a formalized meeting or environment would no doubt have attracted the attention of officials of the Directorate of State Services (DSS) but delivered in jocular form, the same message was often passed on in the presence of the President. Thus Alibaba's celebrated efforts at getting the Nigerian populace to see comedy as a serious business, with the benefit of hindsight can be described as highly commendable. The import of his groundbreaking actions is that there is always a platform to pass on the unpalatable societal and political messages that need to be heard.

Amongst the common political issues often addressed by politicians are a failure to keep election campaign promises, rigging, vote buying, bad governance, corruption, graft, embezzlement, impunity, breach of fundamental human rights, tribalism, nepotism and inequality. Usually, the comedian has the backing of the average citizen in addressing these issues and sometimes these issues are brought to the public domain for the first time through the presentation and antics of the comedian. These burning issues delivered in comic form also serve as some sort of pain reliever as the average citizen can laugh about issues that sometimes cause heartache. In comic circles, this is known as seeing the lighter side of an issue. An example would suffice at this point. One issue that has consistently plagued Nigeria and Nigerians over the years is the issue of constant power outages. These constant power outages cripple businesses and do not allow the average Nigerian to enjoy simple necessities like his Television set and his electric iron. In the mid-2000 however, most comedians that addressed the issue of power outages gave it a sexual undertone claiming that the power outages especially at night gave married couples a quiet and discreet environment to enjoy their conjugal rights. Comedians would often point at people who were particularly dark-skinned throwing jibes that they must have been conceived during a severe power outage.

It thus would not be out of place to state that comedy and humour are often used as a coping mechanism to make the unbearable bearable and always endeavouring to help people see the lighter side of any issue. With the attendant professionalization of the Stand-Up comedy practice in Nigeria, comedians now pay greater attention to detail while rising professional and endorsement fees have seen them work harder to stay relevant.

Conclusion

It can thus be stated, without doubt that laughter is good medicine. In a religious context, specifically a Judeo-Christian context it has been explored and discovered that God laughs and expects his creation to only laugh at what is funny. This work also shares a contextual example from the Holy Bible showing how a scorned woman through the mercy of God gave birth to the revered Prophet Samuel. Medically it has been proven that Laughter has tremendous health

benefits often expediting the recovery of a terminally ill person. Culturally in Africa, laughing at a person's misfortune was a misnomer and an action that according to folklore and mythology could lead to the same or worse consequence being visited on the laughing party. Hence African parents are always quick to descend on and reprimand their children when they exhibit the common childish trait of laughing at their peers and contemporaries.

It can also be stated that the timing and context of laughter are as important as the laughter itself as there is laughter that is not appropriate. This paper explores the fast-emerging social media culture of laughing people to scorn and the potential or attendant dire consequences it could have for society. Laughing to scorn is often a subtle attempt to show superiority and the unwritten and unstated intention is always to cause shame, embarrassment, pain and tears. It is the view of the authors of this work that this fast-emerging negative trend should be sharply resisted so that it does not gradually become entrenched as acceptable societal behaviour.

The fact that indeed laughter is good medicine contributed in no small measure to the meteoric rise of standup comedy in Nigeria. For middle-class and poor Nigerians, living in Nigeria can be difficult and burdensome. There is an embarrassing lack of amenities, insecurity is rife, Universities are incessantly on strike and the inflation figures are quite alarming making the cost of living in Nigeria quite high. This perhaps explains why migrating to places like Canada, The United Kingdom, The United States and Australia is very popular among young Nigerians. Before the galvanizing efforts by Alibaba in the late 1990s and early 2000s comedy was not taken seriously and consequently was undertaken as part-time activity by those involved in it. Alibaba's pioneering work however transformed the work of a comedian into an admirable venture and led the leading practitioners into stupendous wealth and fortune. Today it is common to see a recognizable comedian as the feature character in a high-powered advert. Technology has also played a key role in the exponential rise of comic content online. With a good camera phone, sufficient data and a good set, the talented roadside bloke can shoot amusing comedy skits and host big social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to gain a following. Indeed, this has been the story of many young, emerging Nigerian comedians. The comedian usually takes up the role of a social critic. It has been stated and evidence abounds to ascertain the claim that certain social messages are usually delivered safely through the vehicle of comedy. Indeed, what would usually draw consternation and anger is usually delivered in a very palatable form through comedy.

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