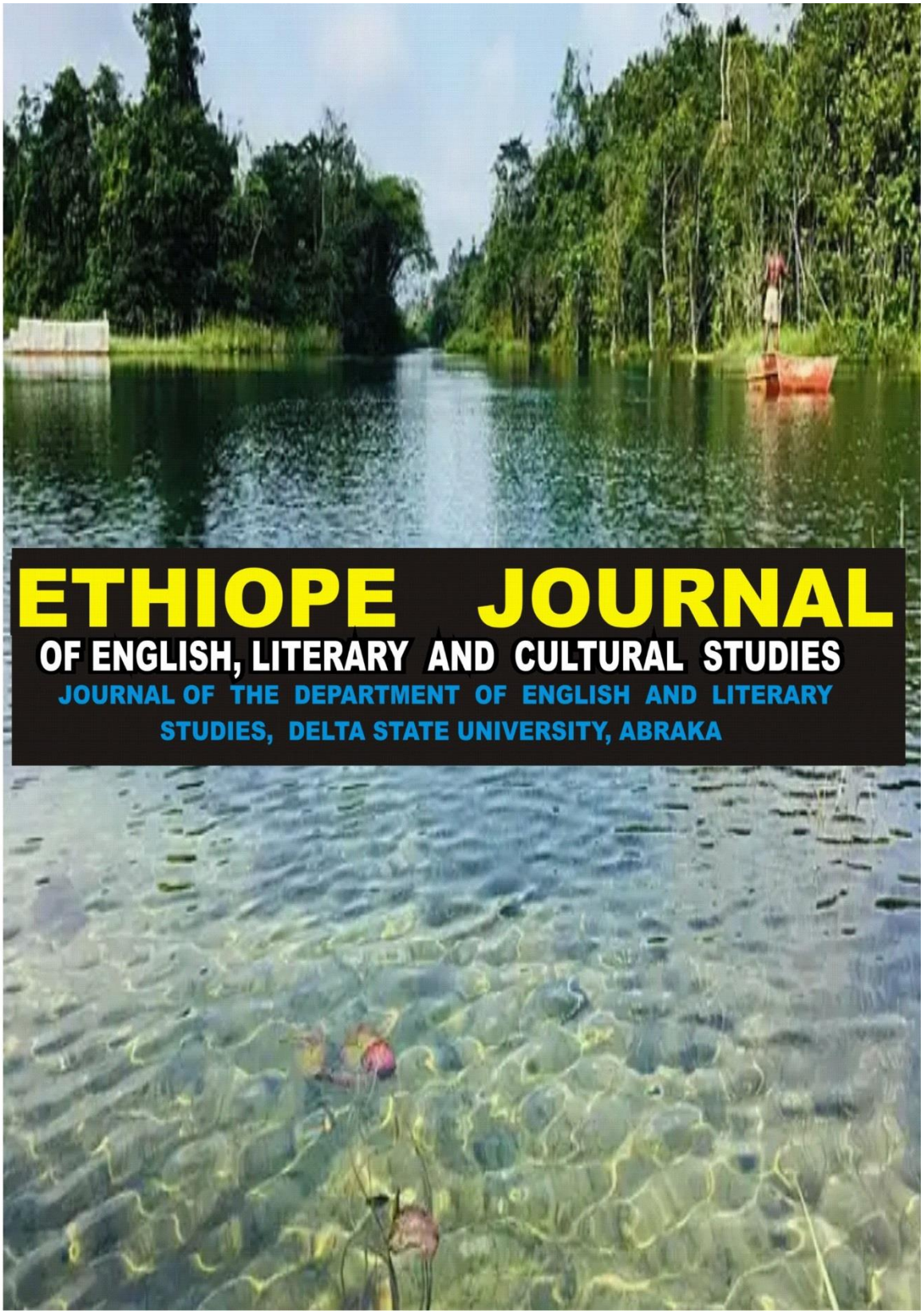

ETHIOPE JOURNAL

OF ENGLISH, LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

JOURNAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES, DELTA STATE UNIVERSITY, ABRAKA

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EDITORIAL NOTE

The Ethiope Journal of English, Literary, and Cultural Studies (ISSN: 0795-5413) is an interdisciplinary journal that explores topical and generative issues in English linguistics and literary and cultural studies. We recognise that African humanities research is both problem-based and knowledge oriented, and we aim to provide a platform for scholars to analyse and theorise Africa in a way that is generative, conversational, and decolonial. Specifically, the journal focuses on both the analytical and theoretical approaches to knowledge production in the context of Africa and the Global South. We want to curate papers that are hinged on African indigenous paradigms and approaches or that seek to extend, reimagine, or contextualise current theoretical or analytical approaches in English language studies and literary and cultural studies.

We invite papers that dwell on all aspects of English language studies, including phonetics/phonology, semantics, syntax, discourse analysis, pragmatics, stylistics, ESL, ESP, etc. We also welcome papers that theorise literary and cultural texts, including film, still and moving images, music and dance, photographs, cultural objects, spaces and places, society and social formations, and other relevant corpora. While we accept purely analytical essays, we encourage authors to focus on theorising the texts or data they engage with. In particular, we welcome theoretical conversations that implicate postcolonial subjecthood, ecocritical approaches (especially postcolonial ecocriticism), feminism and gender studies, new trends in linguistics, object-oriented criticism and approaches, and other generative approaches to knowledge production. Authors are encouraged to do original theorisation rather than adopt extant theoretical frameworks. They may also extend the scope of extant theories and approaches based on the material they present and discuss.

Furthermore, papers with interdisciplinary approaches are also welcomed. We recognise that knowledge production is an elastic phenomenon, and that bright ideas might implicate various fields. Interesting multi-modal, eclectic, or collaborative research is encouraged in this journal.

JOURNAL POLICY

The Ethiope Journal of English, Literary and Cultural Studies is published biennially by the Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria. All papers submitted to this journal will undergo double-blind peer review before publication. Published papers are well-researched, original, and data-driven.

Contributors are to submit an e-copy of their manuscript for assessment and publication to ethiopejournal@delsu.edu.ng or ethiopejournal@gmail.com. Such manuscripts should be original and not under consideration for publication elsewhere and should not have been published in any other journal.

The submitted manuscript which should not exceed 7000 words should be typeset in MS Word Times New Roman Font 12, with double line spacing. The first page should include the title of the manuscript, name(s), and institutional affiliation/address, abstract (not more than 250 words and with not more than six keywords). Manuscripts should conform to the current APA or MLA style sheet. Author(s) of published papers will derive the benefits from peer-review of contributions by seasoned scholars, global visibility, and receipt of hard copies as well as soft copies of their papers.

The papers in this edition of the journal cut across disciplines in cultural, and media studies and sub-disciplines in English and literary studies. The contributors include seasoned and renowned scholars of international repute and young astute scholars with a burning desire to excel in academics. It is pertinent to note that the journal accepts contributions from scholars and researchers across the globe. We believe that articles in this volume will be of immense interest to researchers and students.

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FROM MINSTRELSY TO SKITS: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF NIGERIAN STAND-UP COMEDY

By

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Abstract

The current study attempts a concise historical account of the evolution of Nigerian stand-up comedy through a four-part discourse of minstrelsy, orality, modern showbiz, and skit-making. The first part accounts for modern stand-up's aboriginality (especially as a commercialised pop event) from the mid-1800s American minstrel tradition – itself culturally associated with English music hall, and latter vaudeville heritages – highlighting the shift from collaborative musical comedies to an individual public address. The second part discusses how completely detached from Anglo-American comic traditions, indigenous Nigerian societies have long maintained rich traditions of public comedy, steeped in oral traditions of rhetoric, song and masks, rituals, and special social etiquettes. Afterwards, the paper realises how the dialectics of postcolonial experience helped realise Nigeria's stand-up tradition, an aesthetic of the indigenous and modern in the styling of comic material and language of performance. Lastly, the social media evolution is taken into cognisance to come to terms with the extent to which it is providing a radically inexpensive and accessible alternative to readily available comic entertainment to the public, in an understated competition with stand-up comedy.

Keywords: Nigerian stand-up comedy, minstrel, oral tradition, mask, skits, social media.

American Minstrel and Vaudeville Origins of Stand-up

There are scholarly opinions that suggest that it is not very practical to distinguish contemporary stand-up art from ancestral and vaudeville forms of comedy performances (Jakoaho & Marjamäki, 2012, pp. 6-7; Limon, 2000, p. 126). While both differ in how they are artistically packaged for public consumption and patronage, both point to the same communal apprehension of the role of laughter in the polis, and the social, cultural, and political structures needed to facilitate this. 'Stand-up comedy' (in the sense of a purposive public paying event where laughter through performances of body and rhetoric are promoted beforehand as the mainstay – if not the only attraction – of the occasion) of course, was never peculiarly, a form of Nigerian entertainment. Its roots are "typically located in (at least) two major genres of Western popular entertainment: English music hall and American vaudeville"; both featuring motleys of "verbal and non-verbal comic performance, dance, music, and mime" (Lindfors, 2019, p. 47). This kind of metatheatrical entertainment dominated Western popular culture in the early 1900s. It constituted a fragmentary and heterogeneous instead of a unitary structure, largely unconventional performer-audience rapport, and "a reliance upon crude shock to produce emotionally intense responses" (p. 47). The Anglo-American vaudeville aesthetic thrived on bowdlerising the narrational evolution of scenarios, as well as character development; opting instead for routines of impersonal cliché and instantly recognisable caricatures of public personalities. The mid-1900s would see stand-up's otherwise fortuitous and manifesto-less emergence, stabilised by the period's interest in and engagement with individualism and autonomy, authenticity and diversity, spontaneity, and improvisation, and the social sciences and modern psychology. Post-World War II joke-telling began to take a confessional turn, where personal pronouns in jokes weighed more autobiographically than ever before, such that by the 1970s, personal reference

or self-reflexivity became an expectation to fulfill when performing stand-up. Authentic persona were now configured with a social message, as stand-up became a face-to-face between performers and audiences, as equal interlocutors in the shredding of the fourth wall – and symbolically of the curtain between the intimate and the public (pp. 48-50).

The Boston-founded vaudeville aesthetic would itself emerge from American minstrel shows in 1840. These minstrel performances featured Caucasian monologists in blackface, distorting and mockingly mimicking African Americans. Thomas Dartmouth Rice (1808-1860) inspired this movement when he originated the Jim Crow character, effectively creating a racist sociopolitical satire that appealed to whites of all classes, in its grotesque, derogatory, and subaltern archetypes of African-American males. Minstrelsy thrived on the portraiture of life in the South of the United States and soon became the first distinctly American genre of popular theatre. But it had a dark, racially exploitative background – effectively entrenching the roots of historical Euro-American stand-up until the 1940s, in prejudice and offensive otherness (Bloomquist, 2015; Kippola, 2012, pp. 176-77; Oliar & Sprigman, 2008, p. 1843). Minstrel performances were not exactly 'theatre' in the sense of the word – they were quasi-theatrical. Their musical comedies drowned plottal possibilities, for themes and loose characters, among which were "the endmen" and "the olio" (a selected endman, or both endman and olio, who delivered the racist-satirical "stump speech"). Vaudeville playhouses refined the minstrel style, replacing comic songs with funny-speaking emcees. By the late 1950s, the vaudeville had created a generation of comedians such as Myron Cohen, Danny Thomas, and Bob Hope; who would in turn, inspire the likes of Dick Gregory, Lord Buckley, Bob Newhart, Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, and Bill Cosby. By 1966, right at the heart of the succeeding vaudeville tradition, both the *Oxford English Dictionary*

and *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* had recognised "stand-up comic" as a valid entry into the English performance vocabulary (Mendrinos, 2004).

Double (2017) however contests this dating, insisting that the first recorded usage of "stand-up comic" predates the oft-cited August 11, 1966 article published in *The Listener* (a London-based weekly magazine established in 1929 by the British Broadcasting Corporation). Double would discover

> an earlier use in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, published in 1961, which gives a definition of the adjective 'stand-up' as: '[P]erformed in or requiring a standing erect position <*stand-up* lunch> <*stand-up* bar> <*stand-up* comedy act> <*stand-up* boxing stance>' (p. 106).

Interestingly, *Webster's Dictionary* situates the "stand-up" in stand-up comedy within the same linguistic breath as the stand-up boxing stance. Double's search for an even earlier usage amounted to the following revelation:

> The earliest term seems to be *stand-up comic* – in a review of a show at Slapsy Maxie's in Los Angeles, dating from 23 June 1948: 'When not at his trade of stand-up comic, [Lou] Holtz is ringmaster of the floor show.' (*Variety* 1948) *Stand-up comedian* is slightly younger, not occurring until 12 April 1950: 'Male talent getting the Columbia buildup include Steve Allen, a so-called "standup" comedian who has been groomed for the big time on the Pacific Coast Network' (*Variety* 1950) (p. 106).

Double goes on to identify varying spelling variations and contractions in the history of stand-up's associated terms (especially as an exclusively American

cultural product): ‘stand-up’, ‘standup’, ‘stand up’ (its earliest non-contracted version, found in the Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive, dated January 10, 1951) (p. 106).

Although the stand-up innovation was “most directly inspired by the White Southerner Mark Twain and the Cherokee Will Rogers” (Tafoya, 2009, p. 127), stand-up’s actual debut has been interestingly traced to a Black vaudevillian, named Charlie Case (officially spelt so, but the comedian himself reportedly preferred the colloquial “Charley”) (p. 228). Mark Twain had performed “direct-address entertainment since 1857”, and had developed a reputation as a ‘comic lecturer’ “since October 2, 1866, when he spoke for the first time before an audience that had paid solely for the privilege of hearing him” (p. 111). Will Rogers also performed solo but with the aid of props. But neither constituted the defining features of stand-up comedy. The vaudeville tradition would witness a remarkable advent of what would be known especially as stand-up comedy, when Charley Case, “an African-American who could pass for White, took to the stage for the explicit purpose of telling jokes directly to the audience to elicit laughter” (p. 111). Case would dress normally for stage in the 1880s and 1890s, and perform jokes and funny stories without props; pioneering in essence, comic monologues without accompaniments, which was an uncommon style for that age. Charley Case did what had never been done before, and was largely successful at it (Tafoya, 2009, pp. 111, 207), and his concern was mainly about the “adjustment to city life and life in an increasingly industrialized world” from where he sourced his material (p. 119). Not much is known of Case’s personal life, but he was said to have begun as a blackface minstrel performer, using his mulatto heritage as a loophole to get into the racially dominated entertainment industry. Case was a depressed individual, of a quiet disposition, neurotic, and struggled a bit with his mulatto heritage. So when he died on November 26, 1916, in a hotel on 45th Street, Manhattan, New York, there were conjectures of suicide,

even when the official cause of death was an accidental discharge from his revolver while cleaning it. Case's death opened the vista for the modern idea of the comedian as a closet depressed and tortured individual, adept at exploding that nervous energy into self-reflexive humour onstage (McGraw & Warner, 2014; Spaeth, 1927; Tafoya, 2009, p. 112; Trav, 2011).

Indigenous Nigerian Oral Traditions of Public Comedy

As previously stated, stand-up comedy was never a historically particular form of Nigerian popular entertainment. The closest it came to this, was the pre-modern art of court jesters, clowns, and village orators, getting pecuniary tokens for their acts. It would only become a popular form of entertainment in its modern commercialised form in Nigeria, when adapted from Western vaudeville culture (Adekunle, 2022, p. 78; Onyerionwu, 2010), to materialise in pidgin English, mimicry of various native accents, and comics patenting their routines (Ayakoroma, 2013). While modern Nigerian stand-up comedy, in its staging stylistics of congregating paying patrons to the addressing power of the microphone, can be said to resemble Western practices of the genre, similarly nature artistry has existed in pre-colonial indigenous oral capacities around the country.

Throughout human history, the façade of the mask has been utilised mainly as a performance element in two dimensions: to critique the prevailing order at the behest of masquerade anonymity and spiritual authority, and to perform selfhood in ways that deviate from original selves, such that person and persona are split to effect special dramatic personality. In a critique of selected indigenous Nigerian masquerade traditions (the Onu Kamma of Abacha, Anambra State; the Okumkpo of Afikpo, Ebonyi State; and the Ogbllo of Idoma, Benue State), Orji (2018) reviews how the African mask essentialises the ritual of public ridicule and satire of real persons and topical issues. Such corrective mask performances are particularly either through an indictment-void address from a disgruntled

generation to another, or a ‘morality play’-type carnivalesque admonition against transgressive behaviour. These performances are executed around a very light-hearted and humorous atmosphere, such that all critical content is perceived as the caveat of just joking. Interestingly, audiences of these masquerades almost always know the personal identities beneath, since the performers hail from the immediate community. However, an essential element of the rural mask convention is the public suspension of disbelief and the willing ignorance to see the masqueraders as socio-spiritual essences. The masks themselves can appear abstract in design, grotesque in physiognomy, and elicit laughter. These masquerades perform humorous scolding through the variegated deployment of impersonation and role-play, dance and song, movement, guttural poetic chants, and lucid insults in language embellished. As part of the community they perform to, before they don the masks and costumes, the masqueraders' source material like stand-up comics, by observing, if not spying, stalking, and eavesdropping on citizens of the immediate community that would constitute its audience. Masking for African indigenous societies, was thus at once a communal ritual of leisure and public humorous spectacle, yet a tradition of socio-spiritual edification (pp. 30-31, 34-36). Like the vaudeville blackface to American stand-up, the masquerader rite (ubiquitous in every African tribal society) represents the earliest folk impetus for what would become a modern entertainment staple in Nigeria.

The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria had the *efe* (the art of carnival jest), the Igbo in the Southeast had the *njakịrị* (the playful face-off of gleeful insults), and the Hausa and Fulani in the North had the *yan kama* (literally meaning “the catchers”) and *wawan sarki* (“the king’s fool or jester”). These comic traditions performed by clowns, jesters, and fools were essentially communal licenses granted to certain individuals to orchestrate an alternative reality to official life, by championing the expression of absurdity and satire and relieving on behalf of

their societies, the unthinkable. To cement such license to embody scandalous thought and speech, these jesters were given a social amnesty, such that it was not permitted by anyone to be offended by their non-malicious abuse. The Yoruba *efe* quasi-dramatic art was often performed by *gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* masqueraders in community festivals; with their sniping satirical songs that ridiculed social indiscretions and foolish behaviour, often absorbed by audiences along with the 'just-joking' caveat. The *efe-gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́* performance takes full advantage of a community-endorsed carnivalesque 'day-off' from officialdom and social etiquette, to debase the sacred and proper through relief-humour expulsion of pent-up emotions, in the form of ridicule, jokes, and jest (Nwankwọ, 2015, pp. 48-49).

The Hausa and Fulani *yan kama* performances were burlesque in form, rife with witticism and innuendoes, and were usually put up for money volitionally given by spectators, both in public spaces like markets and social events, and at the palace. The *wawan sarki* on the other hand mirrors the liminal license of the *gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́*, in that it empowers the rhetor within the surroundings of a traditional court as the king's comedian, to by his utterances, index a balance of power between royalty and the plebeians. The *wawan sarki* utilises his fool license to make uncensored and unsanctioned utterances on relevant communal concerns right to the hearing of the king. By so doing, he acts as a mediator between the palace and the streets, representing an important senate voice in the royal court, albeit by communicating weighty public opinion through satiric and jocular guises of slapstick, parody, and burlesque. The Igbo *njakịrị* was more quotidian and demotic than performed as a premeditated spectacle. It usually involved spontaneous verbal jousts of affectionate revilement through sarcasm (*ịkọọnụ*), cursing (*ịkpọiyi*), and bogus or contorted tales between adult friends, especially when in the presence of other friends. This play of the punitive and informal drama of rhetoric and counter-rhetoric is usually marked by a generous dosage of

banter, lampoon, cachinnation, parody, hyperbole, as well as meiosis. At the end of the mock agon, the warring rhetors would retreat to friendly laughter; ceasing without taking any offense (Nwankwọ, 2015, pp. 49-50).

The Urhobo of South-South Nigeria in present-day Delta State, have long organised their system of licensed free rhetoric around the clout of the appointed spokesperson for formal or informal social gatherings such as burials, weddings, age-grade meetings, and community ceremonies. The rhetor is known respectably as *ọtota*, and can be equated as the pre-modern equivalent of today's emcee. Given the patriarchal Urhobo social system, the *ọtota* is usually male, "knowledgeable in the history and cultural lores of the people", and is a verse in the professional "art and technicalities involved in manipulating the Urhobo language" towards joke-telling and display of great wit (Omoko, 2019, p. 2). In many other cultures of the country, the mask, song, and rhetor tradition exist in similar effervescence and are expressed in varying dimensions. These traditions evidence the taste for comedy as a central player in the polis, as a universal reality. The colonial experience then brought about a melding of cultural orientations, and decades before Nigeria's independence urban exposures and increased literacy began to fester new departures in comic expression that gave rise to an eclectic mix of foreign and indigenous artistic inspirations in stand-up – or at least, what looked like it.

Nigerian Stand-up as Modern Showbiz

Hubert Ogunde's syncretic African Music Research Party travelling troupe gets the undisputed credit for siring professional Nigerian drama after debuting in 1945, as inspired by the Alarinjo convention – itself inspired by *egungun* masquerading, Lagos concert parties, and the Church (Banham et al., 1994, p. 76; Clark, 1979, pp. 4-5). But it is Moses Olaiya's comic deviation from the serious,

political, and mythic-historical dramaturgy of predecessors like Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, and Kola Ogunmola, that opened the way for the proliferation of comedy troupes in Nigeria in the 1950s. Olaiya is widely regarded as foremost in the modern convention of Nigerian comedy, especially as he found expression on stage and screen, inspiring in the process, the emergence of some touring comedy troupes such as the Baba Mero troupe (founded by Ojo Ladipo), Ajimajasan Theatre (founded by Ola Omonitan), Awada Kerikeri Organisation, Lere Paimo Theatre, and so on (Adekunle, 2014, pp. 15-17; Fosudo, 2010, pp. 7-8; Jeyifo, 1984, p. 13). These troupes would in turn produce comedians like Aluwe, Aderupoko, Baba Wande, Bala Suwe, Baba ljesha, Dento, Elesho, Mr. Latin, Ojoge, and so on. Olaiya's caricature (Baba Sala) was built on outlandish physical incongruity and the paradoxical characterisation of mischief and cunningness, roguish cleverness and foolishness, and the assertive yet effeminate. The advent of television drama in Nigeria in the 1960s diverted the productive energies of these troupes from touring to producing comic series in dedicated programmes like 'Icheokwu', 'Jagua Half Hour', 'Koka Close', 'Second Chance', 'Why Worry', 'Village Headmaster', and 'Papa Ajasco'. Popular faces from these television series like Chika Okpala, Dejumo Lewis, and Funso Adeolu; as well as the talented new crop of artists and media practitioners like Bisi Olatilo, John Chukwu, Mohammed Danjuma, Tony St. Iyke, and Sunny Iraboh, took to anchoring pageants, concerts and weddings as emcees. Anchoring these events required wit and humour, and consequently, a garb of stand-up. John Chukwu was the first to seize the initiative and open a nightclub cum comedy café in Lagos (Klass Nite Club), to professionally practice stand-up in the early 1980s. It was a growing success until he died in 1990. Mohammed Danjuma would draw inspiration from Chukwu's pioneering and engage the stand-up art as a business. However, he would struggle to break beyond the overarching societal orientation that viewed comedians and stand-ups as frivolous (Fosudo, 2010, pp. 8-9).

Succeeding generations of Nigerian thespians (particularly those who produced comedy) more or less retained the tenets of the Alarinjo convention, even after their foray into television. The post-Ogunde troupes and even stand-up comedians moved around the country from city to city for performances, consequently being just as itinerant as their predecessors, if not even to international proportions. More so, music and dance were (and continue to be) very relevant features of comedy sketches and skits, as well as stand-up performances, in the same way they were to the Alarinjo. Furthermore, like traditional theatrical productions, modern stand-up comedy in Nigeria borrows copiously from folk sources to compose its material. After Moses Olaiya's excitingly disruptive comic performance forays, the native-modern syncretism of Nigeria's Alarinjo convention would find in the emergence of Gbenga Adeboye in the early 1990s (after John Chukwu's death), a more individualistic performance of comedy. As an ace broadcaster, Adeboye was able to devise eclectic musical comedy tactics from opera, chants, poetry, and skits, through the radio medium. For his stand-up performances, Adeboye developed a syncretism of Christian, Islamic, and indigenous Yoruba religious ideologies, to seamlessly play pastor, *Alhaji*, and traditional spiritual authority (*olúwo*). However, his death at the age of forty-two put paid to his growing reputation and contribution to the neo-cultural character of Nigerian theatre at the time (at the behest of the comic genre, of course), especially in the way it transgressed ethno-religious and politico-linguistic social stratification (Aguoru, 2022, pp. 22-25).

Chen (2018), writing for *The New Yorker*, contributes to the periodisation of, and foreign-local inspiration behind Nigerian stand-up:

> The history of standup comedy in Nigeria, as with cartooning, is that of a deep-rooted culture finding resonance with a foreign art form. The formal practice of telling jokes in front of an audience originated with the village spokesmen

> who host public events, spicing them up with wit and humorous anecdotes [...] Comedy was also a part of traditional Nigerian theatre and storytelling long before standup came to the country, in the nineteen-eighties.

Comedy as a modern art form in Nigeria within the first decade of independence, took full advantage of electronic broadcasting to facilitate its growth. The popular half-hour 'Mazi Mperempe' programme that aired on Radio Nigeria and the defunct Anambra State Television in the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s, is a special example. Comedians like John Chukwu, Tony St. Luke, and Jude Away Away, as well as caricatures like Baba Sala and Samanja, held sway in the late 1980s to early 90s. But their pioneer efforts did not make the art boom as it has today (Ijalana, 2010; Tolulope, 2014). Stand-up comedy, even with John Chukwu's and later, Gbenga Adeboye's artistry and enterprise, would however remain a trifling venture in Nigeria, until the foray of Alleluya Atunyota Akporobomerere (stage alias: Ali Baba) into the industry. Ali Baba began stand-up comedy in 1987 as a Religious Studies/Philosophy undergraduate at the Bendel State University (now Ambrose Alli University), Ekpoma. His first performance was impromptu, on campus, and he was rewarded with a ₦50 performance fee for it. After graduation, Ali Baba relocated to Lagos in 1990, and the higher-paying show organisers there made him realise the potential of his craft. Show organisers in the Universities of Benin and Port Harcourt at the time, would only pay a maximum ₦500 performance fee. But Therapy students in the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), clubs around the axis of the University of Lagos campus, and Yaba College of Technology (YABATECH) students, were willing to pay performance fees as much as ₦1,000 to ₦1,200 (Gabriel, 2012; Nwanne, 2010).

Ali Baba was one of the first to professionalise stand-up comedy in Nigeria. However, he had contemporaries like Agoma, Alarm Blow, Basorge Tariah Jr.,

Ibokoko, and of course, Mohammed Danjuma. Ali Baba did work with corporate organisations, including an advertising agency, but such was the lucrative market for comedy in Lagos, that his earnings constituted only a tenth of what he made from major stand-up gigs in town. Ali Baba would resign from his salaried employment to invest in the more profitable talent. He was featured on television shows such as *Friday Night Life*, Charles Oputa's *The Charly Boy Show*, and Bisi Olatilo's *Night Train* on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) network; and promoted himself through adverts in newspapers, and on billboards, car stickers, and radio jingles (Gabriel, 2012; Nwanne, 2010). Ali Baba featured in television shows alongside names such as Patrick Doyle and Danladi Bako; and had cameos on radio shows with seasoned practitioners like Soni Irabor and Mani Onumonmu. Ali Baba's resolve to advance his professional craft of comedy, in a clime and time where there was hardly any precedent to model himself after, especially as individuals like John Chukwu, Tony St. Iyke, Patrick Doyle, Bisi Olatilo, Femi Jarret, Leo Onwudi and Smart Otemu, who had the gift of making people laugh, did not engage in comedy full-time (Ajumobi, 2016).

In 1998, he registered his company (Ali Baba Hiccupurathird) and erected three billboards in strategic highbrow locations in Lagos: Ozumba Mbadiwe Street, Victoria Island; Osborne Road, Ikoyi; and Marina. Each of these billboards cost Ali Baba ₦150,000 annually, and was erected to display a terse visionary post: "Ali Baba – Being Funny is Serious Business". His big break came when Guinness Nigeria, recognised his corporate branding and offered a ₦1.5 million contract for a nationwide tour-launch of its new Satzenbrau Beer (Gabriel, 2012; Nwanne, 2010). Ali Baba's stand-up was definitely not *l'art pour l'art* – in a largely dysfunctional polis like Nigeria, it was not detached from a didactic, sociopolitical, or utilitarian function:

> Ali Baba watched videos of Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor, and was inspired by a tradition of African-American

> comedy that used humour to cope with racism and oppression. He told me, "If standup was used at the time for emancipation, for entertainment, for expression of their feelings, for them to be able to water down the effects of the damage that being enslaved had cost them, then it was wise for me to also use that" (Chen, 2018).

Ali Baba's insightful sociopolitical satire would win him the affection and regular patronage of the first elected President of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, after his return to democratic rule in May 1999. Former military Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo, was known for his sense and love of humour, and in Ali Baba's performances at the presidential villa, he found not just a kindred spirit, but a non-malicious voice for plebeian-representative jest.

Opa Williams is widely credited with the entrepreneurial development of modern Nigerian stand-up comedy. As a movie producer in the Nigerian film industry, fiscal return from his home videos was many a time frustrating, given the irregularities in the Nigerian film industry, where marketers short-changed producers. During a movie shoot of a hospital scene at the National Orthopaedic Hospital, Igbobi, Lagos, his crew met an actor, hospitalised after a car crash. To cheer up the bedridden actor, the cast and crew began making jokes, provoking laughter from him and other patients in the ward, including a doctor who unknown to them was about to have his ward round. Opa Williams ruminated on this and realised the therapeutic quality of comedy (Ayakoroma, 2013; Chen, 2018). The result of this insight would be a vaudeville-style stand-up show – *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* – that debuted on October 1, 1995, at the Akoka campus of the University of Lagos. The show was a success in terms of artistic output, but a flop in terms of fiscal returns. Believing in its promise, Opa Williams returned with another edition in 1996; this time with corporate sponsorship.

Another loss ensued, and the sponsors retreated. Over the years, the show trudged on; helping meagrely paid jesters and funny rhetors used at odd intervals of events, bloom into reputable comics. Opa Williams commoditised laughter and made stand-up veritable, tutored comics on the professional imaging of proper dressing, and dared to insist that stand-up could take place in highbrow venues and attract sizeable performance remuneration. Opa Williams' *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* helped to showcase many stand-up comedians like Mohammed Danjuma, Sammy Needle, Sam Loco Efe, Junior and Pretty, and Boma Erokosima, who in the past lacked such a corporate platform. The show also showcased talents on a bigger national platform for the first time. Some of them were Basketmouth, Julius Agwu, Gandoki, Klint de Drunk, I Go Dye, I Go Save, AY, Maleke, Gordons, Emeka Smith, Teju Baby Face, Holy Mallam, Michael Ogbolosingha, MC Abbey, Yibo Koko, Princess, Lepacious Bose, Buchi, MC Shakara, Bovi and Elenu (Ayakoroma, 2013).

Nite of a Thousand Laughs became at once a money-spinning event and an academy of sorts, for raw talent. It helped the stand-up art become so gainful in Nigeria, that by the mid-2010s it had become an inevitable inclusion in soirees and clubs, consequently attracting investors and university graduates as performers (Tolulope, 2014; Ijalana, 2010). The guaranteed periodic production of *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* around urban centres and city capitals across Nigeria, helped stabilise the stand-up phenomenon in the country, such that what was theretofore an unheralded and under-patronized pastime, became a staple entertainment (Orji, 2018, p. 32). The result has been a healthy explosion of talent and opportunities in the industry:

> Today in Nigeria, there are slapstick comics, who are as much mimes as comedians; comedians who trade in ethnic humour in local languages; and urban comedians, speaking

> pidgin, who mock Nollywood celebrities and musicians. Nigerian standup comedians m.c. weddings, birthday parties, and burial ceremonies, where they have largely replaced the radio hosts and television personalities who used to preside. The biggest standup comedians sell out large shows and star in multimillion-dollar-grossing films (Chen, 2018).

Like the Jamaican Creole, Nigerian comics use their pidgin English to foreground social identity, challenge the centric claim to national linguistic accessibility, and renew and reinvigorate experience and reportage through neologisms and regional slang. By the effervescence of their pidgin public performances, Nigerian comics have helped construct a rallying point that both efficiently manages the nation's postcolonial dialectics, and asserts on its collective behalf a sense of polis removed from assumptionist imperial structures (Omoko, 2019, pp. 3-4).

These days, thriving Nigerian comics are millionaires (Nwanne, 2010). Not all is rosy for Nigerian stand-up though, as it struggles with issues of gender bigotry in a male-dominated industry, joke recycling and problems of copyright, finance to organise shows and the problem of recouping investigation, and then the advent of social media content creation (Ayakoroma, 2013). The Nigerian comedy scene continues to evolve even today, stretching the boundaries of stand-up comedy as it were, and birthing even more radical innovations that are more attuned to netizen audiences and the new niche of digital consumption. The praxis of publicly performed liminal humour, middle-manning individual observation and communal opinion, previously licensed to Medieval court jesters, idiots, clowns, or renegades (Street, 2018, p. 82), has now evolved into a more rewarding and celebrated role, but not absolutely a more respectable one. Comedians need to not be taken too seriously, lest their freedom of expression and carnivalesque license become sanctionable. Comedy thus proves itself as a site for memory and

tradition, as "a tradition-mediated and mediating phenomenon". This complement is particularly evident in the way "relatively stable cultural forms such as stand-up comedy emerge as derivations and precipitates of anterior forms, while constantly feeding into emergent forms and practices" (Lindfors, 2019, p. 47).

Social Media and the Gradient Flow of Stand-up Towards Skit-Making

From the mid-2000s in Nigeria, there has appeared to be a steady drift of urban entertainment lovers to the visual and performance arenas – a drift to live performance once catered for by conventional theatre. This drift gave primacy to variety shows like Ayo Makun's *AY Live*, Bright Okpocha's *Basketmouth Uncensored* and *Lord of the Ribs*, and Julius Agwu's *Crack Ya Ribs*, over theatrical productions of canonical plays, signifying that the mode of live entertainment and its consumption was changing, and entertainment producers were tuning their art to meet those changes. But from the late 2010s, there would be yet another drift, rapidly challenging the clout of stand-up in Nigeria to engineer social criticism through the performance of humour.

The Nigerian stand-up comedy scene has been grappling with the sweeping effects of newer millennial preference for mediatised comedy skits on social media, accessible with mobile gadgets and internet connection. Instrumental to this transition has been the marked simplicity and logistical improvisation of skit production, the relatability of its scenarios, the independence of its commercialism, and the sheer absence of pressure to impress. With a smartphone, basic editing, and the internet, skit makers could reach global audiences on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, earn from monetised channels on these platforms, as well as from burgeoning reputations as influencers with a large virtual following. This drift of Nigerian comedy's consumption from stage to social media is informed by the commercial success and internet patronage of video recordings of physical stand-up events; and by the fact that the majority of

the younger generation associate popular comedy more with skits than live stand-up shows. More so, the skit industry coalesces skills like content creation, acting, cinematography, editing, and social media management – skills that Generation Z is at home with. On the flip side, stand-up comedy requires competencies in event management, oral expression, frontality, understanding and actuating manifest politics of social discourse, and the instantaneous engineering of the commercial-communal. While virality marks success in skit making, given the shrinking attention span of the global netizen collective; stand-up comedy depends a bit more on the cerebral and the construction of tension to the punchline. The divides are getting blurred though, as many skit makers get invited to perform stand-up routines at live shows, while stand-up comics themselves now feature in skits. Even before the explosive success of the skit industry, comics have always employed skits as promotional materials for their live shows. Curiously, as the skit industry effortlessly co-opts viewers, followers, and subscribers in their millions, stand-up comedy organisers continue to find ways to be profitable, offering the live intimate energy that cannot be felt online. The wild democracy of social media has meant that cliquish holds over the Nigerian comedy industry are very easy to bypass, including allegations of patriarchal limitations of the chances of talented female comedians. This has helped the emergence of skit makers/characters such as Craze Clown and Ade, Woli Agba, Justin UG, Mark Angel, Taaoma, Maraji, Josh2Funny, Mr. Macaroni, Lasisi, Brodda Shaggi, Sabinus and many others. But as previously stated, despite skit making's stunning entrance and huge commercial potential, the stand-up art has managed to remain relevant, engaging, and commercially viable (Asheolge, 2023; Awa-Kalu, 2016; Famuwagun, 2023; Nwachukwu, 2022).

The skit-making industry in Nigeria has seen such commercial success and public acceptance that it has been ranked by Dataleum (a technology training and consulting firm), in a March 2022 report as the third-largest entertainment

industry in the country, worth more than ₦50 billion. Available data point to a potential for the industry's exponential professionalisation of social media platforms like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, to raise its valuation to around $15 billion by 2025. The industry has also been admirably credited with helping to reduce Nigeria's high unemployment rate, pegged at 33.3 percent in the last quarter of 2020, by the National Bureau of Statistics, by absorbing sundry talents from unemployed graduates and industrious youths seeking alternatives to unmotivating white-collar employment. Having emerged as an economic opportunity for Nigeria's teeming youth population to maximise their creative capacities, skit-making has now extended to become a pivotal locus of cultural and political influence in the nation's digital space (Nwakunor, 2023). Through skit-making, humour has been routinely used by the government, private sector, and other social power brokers to service social pedagogy as a sensitisation tool, through creative strategies deployed to counter pernicious narratives or assumptions, and to effect necessary public orientation (Ogba, 2021). Skit-making has thus become a relevant social ideational value of soft power, proving through its communicative humour, its capacity for nation branding, positive affirmation of 'Nigerianness', and cultural diplomacy to transnational audiences (Dare & Olusola, 2023).

The same way Opa Williams' *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* show was inspired by an entrepreneurial reservicing of misfortune at the National Orthopaedic Hospital, Igbobi, and opened a vivacious vista for the stand-up industry, is the same route skit-making is taking to establish its relevance if not indispensability. With a national misery index (based strongly on a measure of economic hardship) rising to 62.79 in July 2022, from 59.4 in December 2021, humour, and as freely available as skits offer, cannot be under-emphasised. A 2021 Jobberman Nigeria report offers a direct potential for the skit industry to help reduce this misery index, by pointing out that it is headed towards a capacity

for an additional 2.7 million jobs by 2025, considering its already impressive 4 million jobs in current employment (Hanafi, 2022).

Over the past two decades, skit-makers have transitioned from content creators to now featuring established Nollywood acts, to becoming huge social influencers and brand ambassadors. They have even had to evolve into versatile performers betraying generic strictures, from emcee-ship to political commentators, as they straddle an effervescent creator economy servicing shrinking attention spans with concise digital content, with live semi-instantaneous performances. There is, therefore, something radical in stand-up's ontogeny and ethos that skit-making has yet to upturn – mobilised around the form's part-theatrical, part-anti-theatrical (thus metatheatrical) deportment. There is also an interesting future for Nigerian stand-up comedy, in the special regard of its now parallel flow alongside social media curated comedy and its burgeoning threat.

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