

# **A Sociolinguistic Study of Social-Political Activism and Non-Violent Resistance in Stand-Up Comedy Performances in Nigeria**

by

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## **Abstract**

Stand-up comedy in Nigeria has attracted scholarly attention from various disciplines. As a growing performance space, its appeal to the youth, and is therefore, driven by the ubiquity in social media exploration. Using extracts from six randomly selected volumes of *'Nite of a Thousand Laughs'*, a Nigerian stand-up comedy show, this paper foregrounds the linguistic and discourse strategies deployed by comedians in their performances for civic protest and willingness to engage the government on serious national issues. The paper concludes that beyond its relaxation function, stand-up comedy is a viable platform for raising socio-political consciousness.

## **Introduction**

Stand-up comedy as a sub-set of humor discourse has been researched widely by scholars from various disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology and linguistics as a result of the multidimensional nature of the concepts, their connection to and impact on other areas of human endeavors. This interest in humor by people from different disciplines might not be unconnected with the wide coverage of humor and the possibility of its applicability to different subjects and contexts. After all, humor is “anything that is or may be perceived as funny, amusing and laughable” Attardo (2011:135). Language scholars’ interest in humor research may not be unconnected to the place of language in the production of humor. This is because language is the vehicle through which humor is conveyed in any human culture. Language is therefore crucial to the production of humor and this has resulted in the various linguistic theories and approaches that have been applied to the study of humor (Attardo, 1994).

In every human society, humor is context-specific. It essentially strives on the functional benefits of entertainment. However, beyond the analysis of the linguistic and discourse features of humor and stand-up comedy, there are other social and political perspectives of humor and stand-up comedy in Nigeria. These include several socio-political protests and agitations inherent in these performances. Thus, beyond just studying the structures and features of these comedy performances, the present study attempts a sociolinguistic study of stand-up comedy performances with a view to examining the linguistic and discourse features for the purpose of civic agitation. The paper attempts to unveil the different socio-political undercurrents in these performances and foreground their values as weapons for exuding subtle protests and non-violent agitations. The paper aims at examine the socio-political relevance and discourse value of these performances in the clamour for social reengineering, especially with respect to reordering perceived disorderliness in the conduct of the affairs of Nigeria as a nation. The paper shall identify and discuss instances of the deployment of linguistic and discourse resources in pointing out social and political vices in stand-up comedy performances in order to achieve social balance.

## **Humor and the Evolution of Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria**

Stand-up comedy is a phenomenal recreation of human experiences on stage in a way that is humorous. It is, in the view of Filani (2015:42), “a genre of popular culture which thrives on the production of humorous utterances”. This comic genre features performers regarded as stand-up comedians “who plant themselves in front of their listeners with their microphones and start telling a succession of funny stories, one-liner or short jokes, and anecdotes, which are often called bits, in order to make their audience laugh” (Schwarz, 2010). The above views underline the primary goal of stand-up comedy which is the creation of humor to entertain a listening audience. Although there are diverse opinions on the origins of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, it is however not indubitable that it is an art form that has become recognisable across different strata and among the generality of the Nigerian society, maintaining its reputation not only as a platform for entertainment but also as a means of expressing opinions, making commentaries, and providing a platform to voice sentiments and bias on lingering issues in the nation, and sometimes the world at large. Stand-up comedy, through humorous means, has thus become an alternative space for socio-political activism and non-violent resistance in the Nigerian society. Rodrigues (2013) corroborates the foregoing when she opines that stand-up comedy is a socially accepted form of aggression.

Humor or its performance is not alien to Nigeria. It has always been an important aspect of Nigerian cultural production. In indigenous Nigerian contexts, the presence of jesters and clowns in courts to entertain the Kings and members of the royal family suggests a pre-cursor of the humor tradition. Often times, these jesters live within the courts and are always on hand to entertain and amuse people and add color to important events and ceremonies in the courts. However, what appears to be the closest to modern day stand-up comedy as we have it today in Nigeria is the different comic relief segments in films and theatrical performances in the 1960s, 1970 and in the 1980s.

Some notable Nigerian comedians whose names became synonymous with humor during this era include Moses Olaiya (*Baba Sala*), Sunday Omobolanle (*Aluwe*), Ayo Ogunsina (*Papalolo*), Tajudeen Gbadamosi (*Jacob*), Kayode Olaiya (*Aderupoko*), and Gbenga Adeboye (*Funwontan*). Another significant and closely related form of performance to which one can also trace the evolution and development of stand-up comedy in Nigeria is the “Master of Ceremony” (MC) concept popular in the organisation of events and social functions in Nigeria till date. Many of these artistes are trained and they get paid to anchor social functions, programmes and ceremonies. They provide comic interjections or interludes of jokes and talks that amuse and make guests or their audience laugh. One landmark and historic year in the evolution and development of stand-up comedy in Nigeria is the year 1995, when Opa Williams, a comedy merchant came up with the idea of having comedians perform on the same stage before a live audience in an organised manner. The show titled “*Nite of a Thousand Laughs*” was developed and soon became popular among Nigerians who could not make the live shows but now have the opportunity to see the performances of their favourite comedians in Video CDs produced after the shows in successive volumes. Thus, 1995 could be regarded as the beginning of the golden era of modern day stand-up comedy in Nigeria.

Stand-up comedy is a unique form of entertainment which engages the audience on sundry issues – religious, economic, political, social, etc. It redefines everyday issues and add comic touches to them. Stand-up comedy within the context of the Nigerian entertainment industry has become a serious business having evolved from a “state of nothing to an enviable state of something” (Ayakoroma, 2013:1). Even though the aim of these comedians is to amuse their audience with their performances, the ultimate goal and societal function of these performances is to make the political class, government or individuals at the centre of their performances to pause and think so as to turn a new leaf in the conduct of their affairs. Ayakoroma also hints at the tranquilizing import of stand-up comedy in Nigeria. According to him, “it is an effective form of anaesthesia to the pains, sorrows, fears and disappointments, frustrations, worries and uncertainties of the average Nigerian”.

## **Studies on Humor/Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria**

There are several studies on humor or comedy in general in Nigeria, from different perspectives and methodological orientations. However, stand-up comedy as a sub-genre has relatively scanty existing research. While studies focusing on humor have identified and explored the linguistic and discursive as well as the pragmatic strategies (Odeunmi and Ogunleye 2003, Adetunji 2013, Filani 2015), the same cannot be said with stand-up comedy as scholars have not fully explore the discourse values of these performances. Adetunji (2013) focuses on the interactional context of stand-up comedy and dwells on the co-presence and cooperation of comedians and audience in stand-up comedy performances. This cooperation between the audience and comedians according to the study is possible as a result of the shared knowledge between the two parties in the production and consumption of humor.

The study highlights the different pragmatic strategies deployed by Nigerian stand-up comedians in involving their audience as co-participants or co-creators of the interactional context of humor needed for the generation of humor. The study identifies linguistic coding, stereotyping, formulas, call-and-response, self-denigration and shared experiences as salient features of stand-up comedy in Nigeria.

In another study on stand-up comedy in Nigeria but with particular focus on Calabar-related jokes, Ekpang and Basse (2014) examine an aspect of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, which centres on how comedy misrepresents certain linguistic metaphors, social and cultural concerns of the people satirically thereby eliciting audience reaction. The work reveals that the comic presentation of the Calabar man in Nigerian stand-up comedy routines is either misplaced or theatrical and does not have a true representation of the Calabar people. Furthermore, in a recent study on stand-up comedy, Filani (2016) analyses and focuses on the use of mimicry in stand-up comedy. The study identifies verbal and non-verbal mimicry as important tools in the hands of comedians and shows how they rely on the background knowledge and shared experiences of the audience in deploying mimicry in their performances. The study re-echoes Adetunji (2013), especially in relation to the question of shared knowledge and background information by the audience in the creation of humor. Another related study is Adegoju and Oyebode (2015) work on the patterns of humor on the Internet. Even though the study sourced its data from another domain of language use (the Internet), the approach is of particular interest to the present study. Specifically, the study explores internet memes deployed for online political campaigns in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. The study did not only explore but also situates their discourse values in electioneering campaigns within the Nigerian context, thereby foregrounding the functions of humour in raising several national concerns.

Another closely related and insightful study to the present study is Bello (2016) on gender-related linguistic features and discourse strategies used by female and male stand-up comedians in Nigeria. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the theoretical approach, the study compares and contrasts the identified features of each gender. This was done with a view to investigating the implications of the language differences for power and identity in Nigeria. The study findings indicate that the differences observed in the language usage of female and male comedians did not make women's speech powerless; rather the women studied were independent and confrontational. Some of the language resources identified in the comedies support the stereotypical view about the use of language by women and men, while others did not align with previous research and are non-stereotypical. The study reveals that women have begun to find their voices on the comedy scene in Nigeria.

## Methodology and Theoretical Orientation

The data for this study is drawn from the performances of comedians in *Nite of a Thousand Laughs*, one of the foremost and a reputable comedy shows in Nigeria. It is a live show that features dance, music and most importantly comic performances by prominent Nigerian comedians. The study derives its primary data from purposively selected extracts from six selected stand-up comedians in Nigeria. Their selection is informed by their consistent featuring in “*Nite of a Thousand Laughs*”, which is arguably the number one comedy show in Nigeria, going by the number of comedians from different regions of the country, the staging of the shows in major cities in Nigeria and the regularity of the shows. Founded by comedy mogul, Opa Williams, in 1995, “*Nite of a Thousand Laughs*” is the first Nigerian stand-up comedy show with over twenty Video CD volumes. It remains the oldest stand-up comedy initiative in Nigeria. The comedians first perform live and their performances are later recorded on Video CDs and marketed to the general public. The scope of this study shall be limited to jokes relating to social and political protests, agitations and happenings in Nigeria in the performances of the selected comedians. These performances were retrieved and transcribed by the researcher for analysis. The different texts of the jokes used for the study were drawn from the performances of these comedians in different volumes of *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* Videos CDs. Given that the evolution of humor and stand-up comedy in Nigeria has been classified into different generations, this study has taken cognizance by selecting comedians depicting this generational differences and outlook.

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis, henceforth (CDA) as the theoretical framework in order to explore, situate and link language use with the social reality within the context in which they are produced. This is also because “CDA analyses texts and interactions, but it does not start from texts and interactions. It starts rather from social issues and problems, problems which face people in their social lives, issues which are taken up within sociology, political science and/or cultural studies” (Fairclough, 2001:26). As a branch of Discourse Analysis which places premium on human talks and utterances as conditioned by social realities, what according to Pennycook (1997:28), “show the production and reception of text is ideologically shaped by relations of power”. It is an interdisciplinary approach and an offshoot of discourse analysis which sees language use as a form of social practice and focuses on powers and ideologies that play out in talks or language use and how people construct realities in their interactions with others. Language users are constantly reflecting their situations in terms of role relation and thus human utterances cannot be abstracted from these social realities. Hence, human interaction and discourse should be seen as reflecting the dominance and inequality in real society. The choice of this theoretical framework is informed by the fact that CDA allows moving a step further than merely seeing linguistic practices as abstraction but rather taking them as language produced and meaningful within particular social context. Applying CDA as a perspective would no doubt relate these performances to the society in which they are produced and consumed.

## **Data Analysis and Discussion**

This section presents the different linguistic and discourse strategies deployed in the performances of the selected stand-up comedians. The aim is to show how these linguistic as well as discourse strategies have been skillfully deployed by the comedians to generate laughter and also to react to certain socio-political and serious national issues affecting the society as a whole. These identified strategies are subsequently classified into linguistic and discourse typologies using their roles in comedy performances as basis.

### **Pidgin as a Protest Language in Stand-up Comedy Performances**

The use of the Nigerian Pidgin is the most apparent linguistic practice and arguably an important feature of Nigerian stand-up comedy performances. It is a blend of the English language and indigenous languages used by most stand-up comedians, and indeed a very large number of the Nigerian population in different contexts of language use. The language is a hybrid of the English language and indigenous language(s) in such a way that certain rules of the grammar of the English language are violated and simplified for ease of communication. It could thus, be described as a hybrid devoid of all the formal rules of English grammar. Nigerian Pidgin is the language with the largest number of speakers in terms of proficiency, use, and the spread of speakers across the length and breadth of Nigeria. While the three “major” languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) and the English language, all have some forms of limitations such as national spread and educational qualification, Nigerian Pidgin has remained a “leveler” language.

It is the only language in Nigeria with the least restriction and limitation features. Consequently, it is the language of choice for interethnic interaction and communication in most contexts with people from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. This interethnic and interactional function of the Nigerian Pidgin particularly becomes more important in the Nigerian context, where the choice of one of the so called “major” languages often generates unhealthy rivalry and suspicion among speakers of other languages. Nigerian Pidgin is used by almost, if not all comedians. Even sometimes when they start a joke in Standard English, they switch to Nigerian Pidgin in a very short time. Stand-up comedy fans and the Nigerian public have also come to see the Nigerian Pidgin as the “official language” of comedy. One is being tempted to conclude that jokes rendered in other languages may not be as funny as those rendered in Nigerian Pidgin. The use of this unifying language makes people from all kinds of backgrounds to connect with jokes as a result of the inclusive nature of the language. Nigerians with little or no education or proficiency in the English language are also taken along in interactions conducted Nigerian Pidgin.

### **Extract 1: (Okey Bakassi, Vol. 2)**

*Today na Workers' Day. And we know the state of Nigerian workers. How things be. The take home pay no even fit take people home again. You know wey back those days when we dey school. Our dream na when you graduate, you go come work for Oil Company. As you dey graduate, even groundnut oil company, we no see. Things don spoil.*

#### **Translation**

Today is workers' day. And we all know the state of the Nigerian worker. The way things are. The take home pay cannot take people home again. You know in those good days when we were in school. Our dreams were to graduate and work in oil companies. Upon graduation, to even get employment or work in groundnut oil company was difficult. Things have changed and those good old days are gone.

In spite of the fact that many of the practitioners in the stand-up comedy circle in Nigeria are university graduates, and can communicate effectively in English, most of them prefer to use the Nigerian Pidgin to amuse their audience. Serious national concerns or issues are stylishly taken away from the realm of formality which the use of the English language often place on certain issues. Interestingly, most of the extracts from the performances of the selected stand-up comedians are in Nigerian Pidgin. Extract 1 above from the performance of one of the selected comedians shows the use of Nigerian Pidgin in stand-up comedy. Nigerian Pidgin is the dominant language in the stand-up comedy business in Nigeria. Although the numerous indigenous languages and the English are also used in stand-up comedy performances, they only play complementary roles to Nigerian Pidgin and this role is sometimes limited to only occasional insertion of a few linguistic items from these languages. To further illustrate the point being made, Extracts 2 below from the performance of another comedian is a case where the entire joke is rendered in Nigerian Pidgin. The Standard English equivalents of these extracts are translated and given immediately after the extracts by the researcher.

### **Extract 2: (Saka and Companion, Vol. 1)**

*Abeg, he dey blow grammar. He talk say he be lawyer. Lawyer? You lawyer pass Gani? Abi, you fit blow grammar pass Gani? The lawyer wey Gani do. The grammar wey Gani blow wey he no fit win Presidential election.*

#### **Translation**

Excuse me, he is speaking a lot of English. He says he is a lawyer. Lawyer? Can you be more lawyer than Gani? Or surpass Gani's proficiency in English? All Gani's advocacy and human right struggles/campaigns never yielded him anything. All the speaking of the English he did, that could not win him Presidential election.

In Extract 1 above, the uses the Nigerian Pidgin to remind Nigerians about the collective dreams and aspirations of young people in universities and how these dreams and aspirations have been replaced with frustrations and disappointments. These very serious national concerns – unemployment, youth expectation and failed promises were skilfully talked about in a laughable and comic manner using Nigerian Pidgin. The seriousness, magnitude and the societal implications of these problems were deliberately trivialised, thereby generating laughter. The comedian uses Nigerian Pidgin to protest the replacement of young people’s dreams and expectations with frustration and disillusionment owing to the directionless and lack of foresight on the part of successive governments and leaders in Nigeria at various levels. As serious as these two issues are in Nigeria’s national experience, the adoption and use of Nigerian Pidgin as it is the norm with most comedians often trivialises these serious concerns for that moment and consequently eliciting laughter from members of the audience.

In Extract 2, Hafiz Oyetoro, popular known as *Saka* in the comedy circle deployed the Nigerian Pidgin in a very comic manner to talk about the absence of reward for diligence and the futility of being upright in Nigeria. The comedian uses a renowned human right activist and social crusader (Gani Fawehinmi) in his comic analogy in stylishly protesting the triumph and celebration of vice over virtue in Nigeria. The name Gani Fawehinmi or simply Gani, was a notable name in the campaign against the abuse or outright denial of peoples’ fundamental human rights in Nigeria. However, as celebrated as he was during his days due to his numerous struggles against the restoration of human dignity and his tireless fights as a Senior Advocate of Nigeria, this multiple award-winning human right fighter could not get a reasonable number of votes when he presented himself to serve as the President of the country. This came as a shock to many Nigerians, who question the conditions or rationale behind peoples’ decisions or sense of what is right or wrong with respect to leadership choices. Some observers and social commentators were shocked and disappointed about the values that Nigerians hold in high esteem in electing leaders at all levels. They fear that money-bag politics and “votes for cash” prevalent in the country will continue to make it difficult if not impossible for selfless and highly committed people like Gani Fewehinmi to be elected into public offices due to their inability to buy votes from the people they wish to serve.

## **Language Mixing as Protest Strategies in Stand-up Comedy Performances**

Language mixing is a common phenomenon among speakers in multilingual settings. It is the idea of using two or more languages in the same speech event by a speaker. Stand-up comedy performances in Nigeria possess a lot of language mixing dynamics which often reveal the complex multilingual situation in the country. Let us consider Excerpt 3 below:



### **Extract 3: (Basket Mouth, Vol. 2)**

Two weeks ago when I went to London. Two weeks ago when a friend of mine went to London, they told me that the way the Police officer, the way they stop you in London, if they want to stop you to ask you for papers, dem go drive beside your vehicle like sir. They put on the Siren. Sir, pull over, pull over. You know, they will talk to you kindly. You go come down. Dem go talk say, can I have your Papers? But for Nigeria, e different, dem go first block half of the road with drum. Pack there! Pack there now, pack there! And they are always drunk. Pack there. Inner light, for night. Even for hot afternoon, dem dey say inner light. The day wey I no say dem dey drink too much, na one night I dey comot for Island. Dem just look me say pack there. Pack there, inner light. I put on inner light. One other car came, pack there. pack there, inner light. Okada come, pack there. Inner light. And dem dey cause hold up well well, dem dey cause hold up too much. And the kind of hold up wey dey Lagos now, hawkers dem dey sell anything, everything. You fit dey hold up, cook food. Dem go dey sell pot, plate, knife, vegetable, tomato.

### ***Translation***

Two weeks ago when I went to London. Two weeks ago when a friend of mine went to London, they told me that the way the police officer, the way they stop you in London, if they want to stop you ask you for papers, they will drive beside your vehicle and say sir. They put on the Siren. Sir, pull over, pull over. You know, they will talk to you kindly. You will come down. They will say, can I have your papers? But here in Nigeria, it's different, they will start by blocking half of the road with drum. Pack there! Pack there now, pack there! And they are always drunk. Pack there. Inner light! for night. Even in the afternoon, they still shout inner light. The day I know that they are drunkards was one night when I was leaving Island. They just looked at me and say pack there! Pack there! inner light! I put on the inner light. One other car came, pack there! Pack there! inner light! A motorcycle came, pack there! Inner light! And they are always causing traffic jam. And the kind of traffic jam one experiences in Lagos now in second to none, hawkers are always on hand to sell anything, everything. In fact, it is possible to prepare a meal (cook) while in a typical Lagos traffic jam. They sell pots, plates, knives, vegetables, tomatoes, just name it.

To paint a clearer picture of the situation in two contexts (London and Nigeria), with respect to community policing and civilian interaction, the comedian in Extract 3 above compares the situation in London to that of Nigeria by not only moving from a perceived “ideal” to an “ugly” situation, he also signals this movement with a switch from one language to another. The comedian deploys code-switching to show a sharp contrast between the two contexts used in bringing out the failures of one by using an ideal benchmark of the way things should be. Code-switching also functions to announce association of topics with specific language, creates certain special meanings, and facilitate particular interpersonal relationships.

Other patterns of language mixing observed in these performances include code-switching, code-mixing and tag switching. There are cases when people use code-switching to hide fluency in any other language in order to display affiliation and show identity with the audience who are most often made up of people from different ethnic colourations. Also, stand-up comedians use code-switching to signal a change in topic, such as change from informal interaction to formal or formal to informal interaction. It could also be used to signal a shift from one context to the other. As shown in Extract 3 above, many times, in bringing out differences in contexts, stand-up comedians switch codes. It is an example of code-switching where the comedian alternates the use of two languages to mark a change in situations/contexts. This comedian's shifts to Nigerian Pidgin from English in the same speech event could be seen as a deliberate linguistic act to communicate the differences in the two contexts used in his performance.

### **Exaggeration, Sarcasm, and Ironic Expressions as Protest Strategies**

Nigerian stand-up comedians also find exaggeration, sarcasm and ironical utterances as very potent tools for expressing displeasure, protesting and registering perceived social ills in the Nigerian society. Exaggeration is one of the main linguistic features of stand-up comedy in Nigeria. It is the deliberate presentation of everyday events and happenings in a fresh manner that make them appear scary or as more than ordinary. As shown in Extract 4 below, exaggeration helps to make people rethink or reflect on the several implications and dimensions of the issue being talked about.

#### **Extract 4: (Ali Baba, Vol. 5)**

For Nigeria here, we no need  
Tsunami. Na so he be. Try check our road now. Our Road take so bad, wey be say you fit drink  
medicine. If dem say shake very well before you drink. Just drink the medicine, drive follow am.  
No need to shake am.

#### ***Translation***

Here in Nigeria, we don't need Tsunami. We are always in Tsunami (referring to incidences of floods in many places). Check out our roads now. Our roads are in so terrible and bad shape so much so that when doctors in the hospitals say "shake well before drinking a drug". Just drink the medicine, then drive on our roads. You don't need to shake the drug.

It involves using various techniques and methods to make events more concrete rather than abstractions in the minds of the audience. The exaggerated events are often part and parcel of peoples' everyday routines but presented in ways that heighten tension and bring up fears in the minds of the listeners. Exaggeration as an important literary and linguistic feature of stand-up comedy is, of course, normally very deliberate and emphasise the need for people to reflect on an ideal against the ugly state of affairs being depicted in the performances. Extracts 5 below present an instance of the deployment of exaggeration in the performance of another comedian.

### **Extract 5: (I Go Die, Vol. 3)**

You see, I dey always talk am. All these ones wey Obasanjo dey privatize things here and there. Comot. You dey shout Obasanjo make people fit say you relate with am. If me be President, first of all na to sell Nigeria. Even una sef, I go sell una join.

#### ***Translation***

You see, I have always said it. All these privatisations here and there embarked upon by Obasanjo (Nigerian President at the time). Shut up! You are shouting Obasanjo's name to make people believe you are related to him [reacting to a member of the audience] If I were to be the president, first of all I will sell Nigeria. Even you, people of Nigeria I will also sell.

In the above two extracts (4 and 5), the comedians deploy exaggeration to make people laugh but also protest against the deplorable state of most Nigerian roads due to years of total neglect. The comedian in Extract 4 uses this linguistic strategy to paint a very comic similarity between doctors' advice to patients to shake very well before taking certain kinds of drugs and what Nigerians experience daily plying Nigerian roads as a result of potholes. Similarly, in Extract 5 the comedian combines exaggeration and sarcasm to express the minds of some Nigerians on the privatisation moves of the government in Nigeria. The joke was at a time in the life of the nation when the then Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, embarked on a massive privatisation of public corporation, an action condemned and kicked against by many Nigerians. The comedian deploys his artistry to exaggerate the issue and goes sarcastic by saying that if he were to be the president, privatisation will not only be the selling of public corporations but will also include the selling of the people or general public alongside these corporations.

Another narrative/discursive tool deployed by stand-up comedians in their performances is irony. When this strategy is employed in stand-up comedy performances, comedians feign ignorance of the right ways of looking at things, thereby presenting an obvious faulty sense of judgement about an issue. It involves a comedian saying something that is the opposite of what he/she really means. Comedians do this humorously when they deliberately mock or insult the object or person to whom the joke is directed. Extract 6 below is a case in point. It is a brief sample of the deployment of the irony as protest strategy by a comedian in one of his performances.

### **Extract 6: (Klint de Drunk, Vol. 2)**

You know, I like the talents we have in Nigeria so much. We are even employing...that is, bringing inside the country other talented people. I know one tailor that they brought into Nigeria. He is a very good tailor. Somewhere in Akwa Ibom, his name is Charles Taylor. Very talented!

#### ***Translation***

You know, I like the talents we have in Nigeria so much. We are even employing... that is, bringing inside the country other talented people. I know one tailor who has been brought into Nigeria. He is a very good tailor. Somewhere in Akwa Ibom, his name is Charles Taylor. Very talented!

As shown in Extract 6 above, the joke is directed at Nigerian government and by extension the people of Nigeria. The humor arises and laughter is elicited because the audience is surprised by the link between images or ideas that seem unlikely or contradictory (the opposite of what one would expect). The comedian, Klint de Drunk, in the extract uses sarcasm and irony as strategies to creatively protest and speak the minds of Nigerians to the government of the day on the idea of protecting Charles Taylor. The comedian does this by painting a picture of the disposition of many Nigerians about the idea of extending political asylum to Charles Taylor, former President of Liberia in Nigeria. An action that was clearly against the wish of most Nigerians and worldwide outcry about doing so. The development which did not go down well with many public commentators and Nigerians in the civil and human right societies became a serious topical issue in the nation at the time. Some observers conclude that the action of the Nigerian President to protect Charles Taylor was a tacit endorsement of his numerous war crimes and human rights abuses against the people of Liberia, which they felt should be condemned by all and sundry.

### **Defamiliarisation as Protest Strategy**

The idea of defamiliarising events has a way of elevating and transforming them from something ordinary into works that are considered art and novel. Practitioners in Nigerian stand-up comedy are very talented and creative individuals who sometimes deploy a combination of strategies to achieve their goals of amusing people and expressing opinions or sentiments on several national issues or government policies. One important way of doing this is through defamiliarisation of happenings and role play, which make the audience encounter the object or subject matter on a different level. An instance of defamiliarisation and role play is presented in the performance of one of the selected comedians (Hafiz Oyetoro, also known as Saka) in Extract 7 below.

### **Extract 7: (Hafiz Oyetoro Vol. 3)**

(Two men holding empty kegs of fuel)  
Congratulations!!! O ti gbopo.

**Saka:** Good evening ladies and gentlemen.  
Happy Independence Anniversary Nigeria, we hail thee.  
Our own dear native land

**Companion:** Joo, joo, joo. Malo kokokuko, ko wa lososokuso, Arise O compatriots ni ki o ma wi.

**The Duo:** Arise O Compatriots, Nigeria's Call Obey.

O ti gbopo, he don cheap. No more queue for petrol station at all, at all. The thing wey you go look for Sokoto, he don dey for inside your sokoto. The thing wey he no dey for inside petrol station, he don berekete for roadside. Na cheape, cheape. He no cost you anything. Just 100 naira per litre.

**Saka (referring to the audience)**

My brother, abi you wan buy. He say he dey too expensive. Wetin dey expensive? Wetin you go buy? Say na me be Baba Iyabo wey deregulate? Abi he no dey far. He far when Oil men when dem come tell Buhari-Idiagbon say make him deregulate. He frown for them, frown for them take... send them comot. When them say Babangida, deregulate, he smile yin, yin. He first smile, higher men confuse, he comot. Them say Baba Iyabo, deregulate, Baba Iyabo, them throw banana for am, he catch am, begin dey chop, chop am, chop am. If Baba Iyabo deregulate to 53, so wetin go concern me wey I no go deregulate to 100 naira.

**Saka's Companion**

Wetin you talk?  
Abi I look like National Assembly. Abi, me I look like Senator? No be petrol me I dey sell? When the Senator dey come meet una for house, give una 50 naira and burger. You chop am. Dem come reach Abuja now. Them no fit tell Baba Iyabo, make he no deregulate. Abeg o ti gbopo!

**Translation**

(Two men holding empty kegs of fuel)  
Congratulations!!! It's now cheaper and everywhere

**Saka:** Good evening ladies and gentlemen.  
Happy Independence Anniversary Nigeria, we hail thee.  
Our own dear native land

**Companion:** Please, please, please. You better don't say rubbish,

***The Duo:*** Arise O Compatriots, Nigeria's Call Obey.

It's now cheaper and everywhere. No more queue for petrol station at all, at all. That which was difficult to come by before, is now everywhere, don't stress yourself. That, which was not available at filling stations is now available on the streets and roadsides.

And it's the cheapest price ever. Not costly at all. Just 100 Naira per litre.

***Saka (referring to the audience)***

My brother, do you want to buy? He say it is too expensive. What is too expensive? What you are actually going to buy. Do I look like Baba Iyabo (referring to Nigerian President) who deregulated? It's been part of us. When oil explorer came and told Buhari-Idiagbon to deregulate. They frown against the idea, rejected it and send them away... When they also told Babangida to deregulate, he smiled yin, yin (dramatizing). He smiled and that eventually sent them away. Then, they say Obasanjo (Baba Iyabo), deregulate. They threw banana at Obasanjo and he jumped at it and start deregulating without considering the merits and demerits of deregulation. If he (Obasanjo) has deregulated pump price to 53, so why won't I deregulate to 100 naira?

***Saka's Companion***

*What did you say? Or do I look like the National Assembly. Or I look like Senators?*

*It is not petrol that I am selling? When Senators come to your various houses (referring to the audience) and give you 50 Naira and burger. You collect them. They will get to Abuja, and now they cannot tell the President (Obasanjo/Baba Iyabo) not to deregulate. Please, it's now cheaper and everywhere!*

In the performance, the comedian theatrically lampoons Nigerian government and legislators over the incessant fuel crisis, inadequate supply and the general state of chaos in the Nigerian oil sector. The problem, which has become a perennial issue in Nigeria appears new and "unfamiliar" as a result of the mode of presentation through dramatisation and defamiliarisation by the comedian. This action transforms the performance away from the realm of just another comic piece about the problem of fuel scarcity and the obvious lack of direction of key players in the oil sector into an artistic piece. This defamiliarisation strategy comes with an additional benefit of drawing attention of the audience to see the performance as a work of art and not just comedy. It thus projects it as a comedy with a "special" touch. It also allows the comedian and audience to distance themselves from the seriousness of the message so that the piece can be enjoyed as art without necessarily jettisoning its protest tone and intentions of seeking change. It is worthy of note that some comedians alternate roles by mere varying their voices to appear as two different characters, some other comedians prefer the idea of using a partner in playing the other character. The example in Extract 7 above is one in which the comedian is assisted by a partner in his performance.

## **Trivialising Serious National Concerns as Protest Strategy**

One other prominent feature of and an important strategy for non-violent resistance and protest in stand-up comedy performances is the idea of trivialising serious national issues. It is the presentation of important and serious issues, tragedy or calamity in ways that make them seem less important, insignificant and unserious than they really are. Extract 8 below is an instance of the deployment of this strategy.

### **Extract 8: (Ali Baba, Vol. 13)**

Four days ago, a man walked into a police station in Ajegunle and the first complaint, he was crying. They have thief my own bike, they have thief my okada, Oga. I don die! Na im I take dey pay school fees ooo. Na im I take dey feed children. They don thief my okada, I am finished! The sergeant was reading his newspaper... Sergeant say Inspector come, see this mumu. He say dem thief in okada, two ships are missing in this country, dem never see dem... You are looking for okada. If you no comot here, I go lock you up for false alarm. They steal your car and you run go police station and give them number, if they open file of the numbers of the one they have not seen, you go go buy a new car.

### ***Translation***

Four days ago, a man walked into a police station in Ajegunle crying and his complaint was that his motorbike has been stolen. They have stolen my motorbike, they have stolen my motorbike, Oga. It is with the motorbike that I pay school fees and fend for my children, I am finished! They have stolen my motorbike, I am finished! The sergeant was reading his newspaper... [Sergeant talking to Inspector] Come take a look at one moron. He says he can't find his motorbike, that it has been stolen. Two ships are missing in this country, we have not been able to find them ... You are looking talking about a missing motorbike. If you don't leave this place now, I will lock you up and charge you with false alarm. They stole your car and you run to a Nigerian police station to give them the number of the missing car. If you are shown the file containing the numbers of stolen vehicles, you will conclude to go and get a new car.

The artistic/creative intention of stand-up comedians is to amuse their audience but this primary function is usually not performed without reasonable delves into the socio-political happenings in the country. To avoid their performances being seen and considered as 'art for art sake' the social relevance of their performances have to be given equal attention. In a nation with regular occurrences of social and political abnormalities arising from inefficiencies in government ministries, executive recklessness, corruption among public office holders and other serious national worries too numerous to mention, stand-up comedians feign ignorance about the magnitude and importance of some of these serious issues to amuse their audience, protest and register their displeasure against these vices and the system that made them possible.

As shown in Extract 8 above, the issues trivialised are mostly common knowledge to the public and therefore when presented in this manner results in laughter. This also means that humor or comedy could sometimes be context-bound and are produced and consumed by a particular group of people in a particular context. The comedian and the audience need to have shared knowledge and certain commonalities in order to connect and relate with the mutual engagement needed in the production and consumption of humor.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have examined the deployment of different linguistic and discourse strategies for socio-political activism, protest and non-violent resistance by stand-up comedians in their performances in Nigeria. Using critical discourse analysis as the analytical tool for these performances and the socio-political contexts generating the different issues raised in them, the study shows that beyond its primary function of amusing the audience, stand-up comedy performances serve as veritable platform for activism and protest in non-violent manners. This subtle protest and civil form of agitation is capable of making the government and its agencies to be aware of the popular opinions, the feelings and general thinking of the public on their policies and programs. As members of the Nigerian public who on daily basis also experience the different forms of frustration arising from systemic failure, executive recklessness and inefficiencies, these comedians in their performances express their displeasure or rejection of these social and political ills in the society in subtle manners. Consequently, stand-up comedy in the Nigerian entertainment space has arguably enriched citizen participation on several issues of public concerns without neglecting its primary artistic function of amusing and entertaining to evoke laughter. In the face of dwindling economy, rising unemployment, sorry state of infrastructure, corruption in public offices, among others societal ills, stand-up comedy provides opportunities for comedians to ventilate their frustrations on national problems while at the same breath protesting and demanding social change. This civilised way of seeking social and political redress in developing nations such as Nigeria is growing across Africa, and should be encouraged as a way of demanding socio-political change. Through these performances, stand-up comedians without going on the streets or staging rowdy protest processions, get their protest messages to the appropriate quarters, and are consequently bound to engender socio-political engineering and change in the society. This paper provides a fresh perspective to research on stand-up comedy performances by foregrounding the different strategies used in raising the nation's collective consciousness about the numerous social and political ills such as inefficiency, executive recklessness, corruption and extortion, and many others that Nigerians contend with on daily basis.



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