STAND-UP COMEDY AS IMPETUS FOR EVANGELISM IN NIGERIA: THE EXAMPLE OF ABOKI 4 CHRIST’S MEDICINAL LAUGHTER

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the use of stand-up comedy as veritable tool for evangelism in Nigeria. Using Aboki 4 Christ’s Medicinal Laughter as paradigm, the study examines the relevance of stand-up comedy to evangelism in Nigeria. The study adopts the qualitative approach and the literary methodology in the analysis of some selected jokes contained in the compact disc (CD) of Aboki 4 Christ’s Medicinal Laughter. The major finding in the study is that most churches in Nigeria have become fertile grounds for the practice of the ‘Gospel Comedy’ genre since it satisfies the recreation and entertainment enthusiasm of most Christians who, hitherto, consider secular entertainment as sin. The study also notes that the integration of stand-up comedy into mainstream church worship has expanded the empowerment scope of most Nigerian stand-up comics given the proliferation of churches in Nigeria. Among others, the paper canvasses the need for governmental efforts at encouraging the development of stand-up comedy in Nigeria in both theory and practice.

Keywords: Evangelism, Worship, Empowerment, Jokes, Audience

Introduction

The emergence of the stand-up comedy industry as popular culture in Nigeria is characterized by growth in leaps and bounds as the comics in their individual creative dexterity keep enlarging their performance platform as well as fan base. Today stand-up comedy has become a major source of side attraction in such social events and activities in Nigeria as political campaign, street carnival, beauty pageant, guerrilla publicity, road shows, sales promotion, traditional marriage, wedding ceremony, chieftaincy installation, coronation ceremony or public awareness campaign. Often times, some of the comics, especially the innovative ones, weave jokes that thematically border on the occasion in which they have been contracted while the fledgling ones resort to freestyle all in a bid to entertain their audience.

Scholarly investigations in present times reveal that Nigeria stands out as one of the most religious nations in Africa. This is evident in the consistent proliferation of churches in every nook and cranny of the country. It is common
sight in Nigeria to behold the walls of flyovers, motor parks, and vehicles in the cities littered with posters publicizing one church crusade or the other. The proliferation is also reflected in the multiplicity of church buildings that are erected at strategic locations on major roads and streets in towns and cities in Nigeria. Interestingly, these churches play host to a generous number of worshippers regardless of the denomination and the period that the church was planted. In order to guarantee consistent patronage of their churches by worshippers, most pastors device captivating means of evangelism. One of such means is to organize special church programmes such as crusades, revivals, retreats, conferences at special periods in the year. For instance, The Winners Chapel World Wide hosts an annual crusade towards the end of every year which it christened “Shiloh”. The Redeemed Christian Church of God organizes a nationwide convention every August each year to evaluate the spiritual and physical growth of the church. Salvation Ministries, one of the fastest growing churches in the Niger Delta conducts a crusade titled “Five Nights of Glory” between late January and early February of every year with the sole aim of preparing her members and associates for the spiritual journey into the year ahead.

Apart from these annual programmes, most of the churches have routine weekly events that run through the days of the week such that the worshippers are permanently engaged. Most of these programmes, which are aimed at strengthening the spiritual stance of the worshippers, also embody some level of secularized performances which trigger the recreational and entertainment sensibilities of the worshippers. Against this backdrop, most pastors rely on stand-up comedy to sustain the interest of their teeming worshippers. In most crusades, stand-up comedy is often introduced amidst Bible exhortations and anointing sessions. This is quite reflective of the Medieval theatrical legacies where drama was integrated into the core of the worship in order to make Biblical lessons more graphic and easy to assimilate. In course of the publicity or advertisement for the crusade, such publicity materials as handbills, flyers, posters, billboards and so on, carry either the name(s) or photograph(s) of popular stand-up comics as part of the marketing mix. In a parallel vein, some stand-up comics create special stand-up comedy concerts in their respective churches so as to accommodate the entertainment urge of the worshippers. Often times, such concerts gain the full sponsorship of the General Overseer (GO) or an organ in the church or a wealthy member of the church all in an attempt to create the ambience of sustainability and dedication in the worship of God.

It is against this backdrop that the paper undertakes a critical survey of the evangelical motive in Aboki 4 Christ’s Medicinal Laughter. The paper would focus on the thematic thrust, performance dynamics and language use in Aboki 4 Christ’s Medicinal Laughter with a view of exposing the evangelical import in the work.
The Concept of Evangelism

The term evangelism transcends its exclusive attachment to religion especially the Christian church. In general terms, it means the process of making conscious effort in order to persuade or convert people into a special group or organization. However, as it appears in the study, evangelism is used in its Christian sense to refer to any effort made by Christian bodies and organizations towards converting people into the Christian faith. During her Lausanne Covenant in Switzerland in the year 1972, The World Congress on Evangelization defined evangelism as:

…to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the scriptures, and that as the reigning lord, He now offers forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the spirit to all who repent and believe. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God (cited in Agoro, p.2)

It is against the backdrop of the definition that Agoro states unequivocally that evangelism is not a human creation but an assignment that Jesus commissioned everybody to carry out. Agoro buttresses his position by stating that when Jesus was physically on earth, he did not only train the twelve and seventy faithful for the business of evangelism but sent them out in pairs to preach the gospel by word of mouth. He adds that:

To prove that the work of preaching the message of salvation was approved, God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. In this way, the message of salvation, which began in Jerusalem, has spread until it has reached Abuja. (p.4)

In another study, Agoro highlights two instances in the Bible where Jesus commands his faithful to take to evangelism. According to him, the first instance is drawn from the gospel of Mark 16: 15 where Jesus charges his disciples, thus: “Go into the world and preach the good news to all the creation” while the second instance can be found in Matthew’s account when Jesus urged his followers to embark on evangelism in the following words:

…therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the
Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (cited in Emasealu, p.38)

The deduction from the review above is that the idea of evangelism revolves on man’s attempt to execute the task given him by his personal saviour. It is therefore, a religious obligation aimed at attaining salvation. Evangelism can also be seen as a call to duty for all Christians seeking to maintain a balanced relationship with their saviour.

The Proliferation of Churches in Nigeria: An Overview

Our reference to the proliferation of churches in Nigeria encompasses the two brands of the Christian missions namely; the movements that have for various reasons seceded from the existing orthodox missions, which in spite of their new order of worship, still reflect some of the doctrines of the mother church. They are often christened ‘schismatic’ or ‘separatist’ movements. The second category would comprise those new churches which are quite detached from any mother church influence. The founders of this brand of churches are often perceived to be prophets, seers, healers and spiritually-inclined. Mbon states that these churches are often referred to as ‘Independent Churches’ largely to underscore the claim by most of the founders that they are independent of foreign origin or control in organization, administration, liturgy and doctrines. Mbon prefers to call the independent churches ‘New Religious Movements’ because ‘...the word movement for all practical purposes, is more comprehensive and more appropriately underscores the dynamic nature of these agents of social change’ (p.1) Mbon also notes that the proliferation of new religious movements in sub-Saharan Africa is rapid and so any attempt to take statistics of the proliferation would amount to dissipation of energy in the wrong direction since such a researcher must have the omnipresent qualities of being in every African community every day. He states also that the theme of protection runs across all the new religious movements in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. The deduction here is that protection is the common and ultimate goal of the new movements in spite of the dissimilarities in their methods of attempting to achieve that goal. As Mbon puts it:

…the members of Africa’s new religious movements are in the movements first and foremost because they feel a need to be protected against life’s undesirable circumstances and believe with all their hearts that they will find such protection in the new movements. The protection sought may be individual or communal and may include physical protection, spiritual
protection, political protection, economic protection and socio-cultural protection. (p.2)

In his article entitled ‘Pentecostal-Civil Society Dialogue’, Obiorah submits that the Pentecostal movement is a major, perhaps, the leading social movement in Nigeria today with a mass membership running into several millions and commanding immense goodwill and support among its adherents. He informs also that the rapid growth of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria has resulted in a ‘cold war’ of some kind between the human rights movement and the mainline churches on the one hand and the Pentecostal movement on the other. Obiorah sums up the raison d’être for the two-faced feud, thus:

As the mainline churches became ever more vocal in addressing the political roots of poverty and social injustice in Nigeria, the people in whose name they campaigned against authoritarian misrule increasingly turned to new religious movements that apparently offered instantaneous miracles while not questioning the dominant political, economic and social framework, perceived by the human rights movement and the mainline churches as responsible for mass poverty and social injustice in Nigeria (p.1)

He recounts further that whereas the evangelical and Pentecostal Christian churches had a distinctive indigenous origin, by the 1970s and 1980s, some of them had forged linkages with American Pentecostal organizations. These linkages provided institutional support to the Nigerian churches and also facilitated their access to the media world, thus taking advantage of the spirit of globalization. In Nigeria today, it has been conjectured that a reasonable number of Nigerians worship with the Pentecostal churches amidst their clamour for instant prosperity with or without hard work. Taking undue advantage of the crushing level of poverty in Nigeria, most founders of the Pentecostal faith who go by such huge portfolios as General Overseer, Presiding Pastor or Pastor in Charge, consistently sustain the interest of their members by emphasizing material prosperity as the yardstick for comfortable living on earth. Often times, they create the ambience of miraculous healings and deliverance from ancestral causes and marine spirits.

The influx of new converts to Pentecostal churches climaxed in the 1990s when most of the adherents of the mainline churches abandoned their old faith and joined Pentecostal churches where they were guaranteed spiritual and economic breakthrough following the collapse of the Nigerian socio-political and socio-economic structures. One of the selling points of new generation churches is the adaptation of secularized art forms into their worship sensibilities- stand-up comedy is one of the adapted art forms.
Stand-up Comedy as a Social Art

Hansen notes that even the most complaint audience must be actively engaged in the audience/actor interaction for theatre to work at all (p.208). The higher the level of engagement the better the theatre experience. Fundamentally, stand-up comedy is one of the few art forms that is openly devoted to getting immediate laughs from an audience. In stand-up comedy, feedback of the audience is instant and crucial for the comedian’s act. Audiences expect a stand-up comic to provide a steady stream of laughs, and a performer is always under great pressure to deliver (Wikipedia, p.2). Quirk notes that stand-up comedy is a battle between audience and performer and that from a comedian’s point of view, an audience can be an intimidating and frightening beast (p.219) In Quirk’s analogy, when an audience does not laugh, the act fails and the experience becomes thoroughly unpleasant, for the audience as well as the performer. Audiences are threatening because they are powerful. The stand-up act may appear a solo, but the input of the audience is necessary to its success. Carr and Greeves corroborate the position above when they state that:

The audience’s laughter is essential to the rhythm of the comic’s set; although they aren’t talking to him (except for the red-faced drunk in the front row), for the set to be successful it must still function with the to-and-fro rhythm of a conversation, albeit a rather one-sided one.

(cited in Quirk, p.220)

The social essence of stand-up comedy lies in the fact that it draws its raw material from the incongruities and eccentricities that arise from man’s inability to adapt to the living codes of an ever changing society. Irrespective of any form the theatre takes, the audience remains the most vital element. In the process of performance, the artist conceives the audience not as a group of men and women seated in an auditorium in anticipation of a performance but as members of a corporate society who have come to share their social experiences and common humanity.

As a theatrical enterprise, stand-up comedy draws largely from issues of social concern – issues that ignite the risible not on account of tribe, religion or social status but because of our identity as members of the same human community. Harbidge recognizes the sense of bonding and social interaction which stand-up comedy occasions when he posits that:

…the live and informal nature of the comedian’s performance, as well as the venue itself, can facilitate a performer/audience relationship unlike that found in most conventional theatres: in stand-up, personalized address and candid geniality intended to strike up rapport with the audience
combines with a relaxed, social environment to generate distinctly free–wheeling, organic art form.

(p.129)

As part of the creative process, the stand-up audience’s consolidated presence, their vital responses and actions are seen to help feed a performance which is as reactive as it is active. Auslander avers that the stand-up comedy audiences are more crucial in shaping the performance than rock and pop audiences. According to him:

Music audiences may sing along, even take over temporarily as the singer extends the microphone toward them. Yet stand-up may be even more dialogic: audience and comedian sharing both a physical and a diegetic space, the performance is more than that which unfolds onstage: it is that which unravels at the intersection of audience and comedian.(cited in Harbidge,p.129)

The conviction behind labeling stand-up comedy a social art lies in its characteristic tendency to draw from the anomalies, inversions, deviations and repetitions of human actions. It lies in its ability to occasion a gathering of men who have come to ease off the tensions of life through intermittent outbursts of boisterous laughter as well as enjoy some form of social interaction.

**Stand-up Comedy: The Nigerian Experience**

The seed of stand-up comedy in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular can be traced to the traditional pastime of storytelling and moonlight tales where natives assemble in the family or village square to listen to the comic and philosophical stories of the old. The story teller is usually a gifted witty and funny individual who must have inherited the eloquence from his ancestors. In spite of the comic essence of the stories, the philosophy behind them is to inculcate morals and virtue on the natives. The stand-up comic art in Nigeria is also credited to court entertainment where the court jester is commissioned to put consistent laughter on the face of the king through jokes.

Also of significance is the historical fact that comedy, as practiced in Nigeria, started gaining enterprising momentum with the comic manifestations of Moses Olaiyain, his solo performances where he resorts to multiplicity of characterization all aimed at arousing laughter. In his article titled “Stand-up Comedy as Popular Art and Theatrical Entertainment in Nigeria”, Fosudo informs that the comic theatrical wealth of Moses Oaliya (Baba Sala) in the late 1950s gave rise to the multiplicity of drama groups in Nigeria (7) Like Moliere, a reputable comic actor, playwright and theorist in history, Oaliya relies on incongruous situations to achieve laughter. According to Bamidele:
Olaiya’s…movement from reality to fantasy is a ready source of comedy even in ordinary life which a comedian like him makes use of. As usual with all comic dramatists, he arranges a situation in which the two views, reality and fantasy, clash and amuse, by abruptness of the contrast. Baba Sala is the characteristic paradox of the comic fool, the cheat and the rogue. He sometimes appears as the stupid wise man, the self conceited coward who challenges the thunder and docks at the next minute, the assertive husband who is flawed by his wife, he is the charlatan who wants to outwit his opponent and finally he is outwitted. (pp.55-56)

Olaiya’s professional disposition towards solo comic performance gave rise to the late 20th century stand-up comedy which is largely entrepreneurial and commercialized.

Also worthy of note is the fact that the advent of television in Nigeria in the 1960s weakened the touring strength of most of the troupes born after Olaiya as many resorted to the production of comedy series for television. The offshoot of this experiment was the production of Village Headmaster, New Masquerade, Second Chance, Iche-okwu, Koko Close, Jagua, Half Hour, Bassey and Company, Hot Cash and Papa Ajasco. These productions in turn also occasioned such star names as Chief Zebrudaya, Gringory, Gorimapa, Jagua, Jegede, Madam Cash, Madam Popo, Oseni, Willy-Willy, Zaky et cetera. Fosudo notes that during this period, the names of such veteran artistes and media faces such as Mohammed Danjuma, Sunny Iraboh, Bisi Olatilo, Tony St Iyke, came into prominence.(9) In addition to their television and media careers, these artistes were also engaged in anchoring events as compeers and masters of ceremonies. Fosudo recounts also that in spite of the robust talents and activities in the comic performances in Nigeria, however, stand-up comedy was not given a professional touch until the 1980s when John Chukwu opened a “Comedy Café” in Lagos. According to him:

It was an arena in the likeness of a night club where fun seekers converged everyday to wine and dine, dance also, to laugh at the jokes of its proprietor…John Chukwu seemed to have planted the seeds which were later to germinate and bear the fruits of contemporary comedy business in Nigeria (p.9)

Emedolibe corroborates Fosudo’s account when she informs that:
…with the exit of John Chukwu came the era of Mohammed Danjuma who, in many ways, commenced the stand-up comedy genre as business. But like some progenitors, Danjuma’s grip on that sphere was wobbly, probably because he lacked the glamour to take it beyond the ordinary limit. This was then compensated for by Ali Baba, a chip off then Charley Boy Show. It was Ali Baba who brought glamour into what is today known as stand-up comedy in the country (cited in Fosudo, 9).

History also has it that back in the mid 80s, few comedians such as Yibo Koko, Ali Baba, Mohammed Danjuma, and Alarm Blow had earned some recognition and goodwill from the public as substantive comedians. Koko recounts also the very beginning of his stand-up comedy experience in 1987, when, as an undergraduate student in the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Port Harcourt, he would organize comedy sketches where he delivered series of jokes to the students in order to generate consistent laughter in a show which he titled “Vaseline Corner”. (Olonilua, 1) Other notable Nigerian stand-up comics include; Gbenga Adeyinka, Julius Agwu, Okey Bakassi, Senator, Tee A, AY, Basket Mouth, Gordons, I Go Dye, Teju Babyface, Dan D’Humorous, Gandoki, MC Shakara, MC Virus, Akpororo, Romeo Without Juliet, Arinze Baba, Funny Bone, Bovi, Buchi, Seyi Law, Elenu and a host of others.

The credit for the transformation of stand-up comedy into a huge commercial venture goes to Opa William’s Nite of A Thousand Laughs. The breakthrough which Opa Williams gave to the stand-up comedy industry in Nigeria is often likened to the boost which Kenneth Nnebue gave to the Nigerian Video Film Industry (Nollywood) following the release of his Living in Bondage in 1992. The bulk of outstanding Nigerian stand up comedians gained their stardom through the stage of Nite of a Thousand Laughs. This breakthrough is also synonymous with the The Tonight Show and Saturday Night Live in the United States that brought the cream of American born and based comedians to the pinnacle of their popularity.

The subjects of Nigerian stand-up comedy border on the leadership question, poverty mentality (characteristic of most developing societies), day dreaming, tribal sentiments, ethnic biases, deviant attitudes, eccentric behaviour, physical deformity, inferiority complex, stress, prostitution, homosexual, lesbianism, masturbation, religious hypocrisy and pretentious lifestyle and stereotyping. The Hausa are often satirized for their mother tongue interference in English language, the Igbo’s love for money, Edo girls in Italy for prostitution and Yoruba who love to lavish huge monetary gifts while dancing at parties. Stand-up comedy is indeed a reinvention of the live theatre in Nigeria which has experienced a remarkable decline since about two decades ago.
Performance Dynamics of Aboki 4 Christ

Aboki 4 Christ stands out as one of the unique and highly creative Nigerian stand-up comics. His creativity is brought to the fore in his adoption and consistency in the use of Hausa accent to deliver his jokes. As the name implies, Aboki 4 Christ puts up the character of an Hausa in terms of language, mannerisms, gestures, interjections and the subjects treated in his jokes. His Ibibio background notwithstanding, Aboki 4 Christ characterizes Hausa personalities to the plausible extent that his aboriginal background gets misconstrued by some of his fans. The name ‘aboki’ is the Hausa reference for ‘friend’. However, the name is being used derogatorily in Nigeria to refer to any man of Hausa origin especially the mercantilist class who engages in such menial jobs as shoe cobbled, local pedicure, dress amendment, hawking of kola-nuts and bitter kola, home delivery of water and so on. The comic twist in the name Aboki 4 Christ draws largely from the derogatory stance of the name on one hand and the ironic note which the name strikes within Christendom on the other.

The spine of Aboki 4 Christ’s comedy lies greatly in his consistency in the adoption of Hausa accent. The mimicry of the tonalities and accents of the key tribes in Nigeria (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) constitutes a very rich source of comedy. Aboki 4 Christ speaks like an average educated Hausa who suffers an overdose of the linguistic complication of mother tongue interference. Unlike, some comics who adopt tribal accents just to deliver a particular joke and drop the accent immediately after the joke, Aboki 4 Christ holds on to the Hausa accent from the very beginning of his performance to the end. It has become integrated into his performance to the extent that he uses Hausa accent to deliver even jokes that mimic the accent of other tribes. For instance, he uses Hausa accent to greet Igbo people traditionally in Igbo language as well as the Yoruba. He also uses Hausa accent to speak English vocabulary as well as sing contemporary gospel songs. The incongruity that arises from his blend of Hausa accent and western mannerisms produce high comic results.

Aboki 4 Christ is not given to exaggerated actions and farcical representations like most Nigerian stand-up comics. However, he makes conscious effort most times to make his jokes more graphic by re-enacting some actions of the personae in his jokes. Often times, he resorts to dancing and singing to add vigour and aesthetics to his jokes. In most of his outings, he puts up the gait of a pastor and delivers his jokes in the manner of a pastor delivering his sermon to his congregation. His pastoral disposition also reflects in his choice of outfit. He puts on a three piece suit most times with corporate shoes and ties to match. He is not given to any form of makeup or loud hairstyle characteristic of most Nigerian performing artists. This could be attributable to the religious attachment which he gives to his comedy. He also attaches some level of decency and decorum in the language and mode of the delivery of his jokes. Even with the Hausa accent, Aboki 4 Christ tries to avoid lewd and obscene jokes so as not to hurt the moral sensibilities of his target audience who are largely drawn from the youth arm of the church. Often times, he resorts to mild mockery of some
members of the audience by putting them in a comic situation but such mockeries are done in a flash and also he tenders quick verbal apologies to the persons he has ridiculed.

He is also a dexterous gospel singer whose voice resonates to the synchronization of his jokes. He laces his jokes with related gospel songs which he sings passionately to the admiration of his audience. He is also skilled at mimicking such physical impairments as stammering. It becomes pertinent to state that Aboki 4 Christ is a total performer who blends singing, dancing and mimetic action in his jokes so as to curry audience easy comprehension and assimilation of his jokes as well as to carve out a niche for himself.

The Evangelistic Import of Aboki 4 Christ’s Medicinal Laughter

It has been established earlier in the study that a handful of the jokes crafted by Aboki 4 Christ in the Medicinal Laughter series set out to satirize religious hypocrisy and pretentious lifestyle amongst Christians. Whereas he acknowledges the need for Christians to hold tenaciously unto their Christian faith as domiciled in the Bible, he also admonishes them on the need to apply human wisdom and caution in certain situations so as to reduce the blame on the devil for certain tragedies. He presents a joke in this regard, thus:

(In Hausa accent)…pls and pls, let me advice, let us drive with caution. Though we are winners, the blood of Jesus is covering us, let us drive (with) caution. There was this brother of ours in Calabar church, he is a driver. After Holy Ghost morning, he brought plenty stickers. You know say winners, we dey like sticker. (attempts to recall the captions of previous Winners’ stickers) “I am a winner”, “Restoration 2010”, “Restoration 2009”…people still get “My Year Laughter 2006”…e still dey dey their car. So this guy put all the stickers…”The Blood of Jesus Cover Me”, “Angels on Guard”…like that like that. So he has carried passengers from Calabar. They were travelling to Lagos. Between Calabar and Uyo, the driver was driving 180km per hour. (mimics the reactions of the passengers) Ah! All the passengers hala “oga drive small small, haba! Na him the driver Say (mimics the driver) Kai! You no see this sticker “Angels on Guard”? Don’t worry. Na im the people say Okay. Between Uyo and Benin, he was on 205km per hour, suicide mission! Na him all the passengers say (agitated) “Oga, we no go go again, drop us, drop us”. The guy got angry, parked his car and says (angry)”…all of you get out of my
car, people of no faith at all. I tell you that Angels on Guard, and you are still shouting drop us, drop us...come on get out. He dropped all the passengers in Benin. Between Benin and Shagamu...he continued the journey. This guy was driving 225km per hour. Suddenly, he heard some voices in the car (in high agitation and tonality) “Oga drop us o, we too no wan go again” (transits to the driver) I thought I had dropped all my passengers in Benin, who are this people talking? Na im the voices shout “we are the angels On guard o! we don’t want to die, drop us drop us! (Medicinal Laughter, Vol,1)

The joke above embodies high satirical intent as it ridicules the extremists in the Christian church who often lead a careless life out of their exaggerated faith in the protective powers of God as emblemized in the sticker that carries the caption “Angels on Guard”. The sense of dogmatism and religious drunkenness expressed by the driver by contravening traffic rules because of his irrational belief potency in the protective essence of his church’s stickers aptly underscores the Marxist dictum that religion is indeed, the opium of the masses. The didactic deduction made from the joke is that while, as Christians, we rely on God for protection against the odds of life, the need also arises that we apply common sense and wisdom in certain situations so as to forestall impending dangers. The joke above has both entertainment and corrective purposes. It is aimed at instilling some form of decency and moderation amongst Christians. Along the same drift of admonition, Aboki 4 Christ crafts yet another joke but this time, he resorts to putting himself in a comic situation by recounting his funny experience in an attempt at giving his proposed wife a treat in an eatery. According to him:

…I say make I carry my fiancée to fast food place. I no know say I want put myself for wahala (trouble). I for stay at the level of recharge card o…this sister instead of her to come alone, she come carry too friends join body, carry two liability follow. As they came to Kilimanjaro (an eatery), as they open the door I just saw them three. My heart comot from where it was planted by God. I discovered that my heart was beating around here (indicates his waist region)...actually why my heart beat change was because I had only seven hundred naira (₦700) only in my pocket…you won’t believe it but as a big boy, I no wan fall my hand (for fear of embarrassment)...if to say I know, I for just buy popcorn come give them, look for pure water add. Na the first talk, I want that full chicken (points
towards an imaginary showcase). When I ask for the price of the full chicken, them say na five thousand naira (₦5,000) and my father just gave me my school fees so I no wan fall my hand, I call my younger brother (mimes making a phone call) pls. check under my pillow, you will see some money, bring it to Kilimanjaro (drops the imaginary call) I told them, make them eat, make them eat. Them eat the chicken, after eating chicken, them collect rice, after rice, all of them drink one, one, five alive (juice), at the end of the day, when they calculated my bill it was seventeen thousand, eight hundred and twenty five naira(₦17,825,00)…Jesus! That is exactly the same amount my father give me for a whole semester. As they give me the bill, God!, The structure of my face changed. Na them ask me, ‘what is wrong with you’? I say no, no don’t worry, no…As I see say them don they understand, n a im I Say ‘Excuse me abeg, excuse me, I want to ease myself. Na that day I know say no be everybody wey go toilet for fast food joint go piss (urinate). Some of us they go complain. I wan go complain, go ease my tension. As I reach the door of the toilet, as I wan just knock, na im I hear the voice of another man inside complaining. The man was saying ‘this money wey this girl come chop for my hand na my oga (boss) money o…wetin I go tell my oga?’ The guy complain and complain, e no gree come out. Na im I knock he door (mimes knocking at the door) koss! Koss! O boy complain your own finish come out, me sef, I wan come inside come complain my own (Medicinal Laughter, Vol. 1)

The joke above is a rider to Aboki 4 Christ’s admonition to Christian sisters who are single on the need to cut down on their high taste towards their prospective suitors. He blames the high level of bachelors in the church on men’s inability to meet with the outrageous demands of single sisters. Using himself as an example, Aboki 4 Christ paints a ridiculous scenario whereby his fiancée subjects him to lavish spending in an eatery without considering his economic status as a student under full parental responsibility. The drift of the joke bothers on the need for Christian single sisters to emulate the non-materialistic life style of Jesus Christ by putting spirituality ahead of material possession in choosing their life partners. The evangelical import of the joke lies in its ridicule of the social excesses of most Christian youths who forsake heavenly ideals in pursuit of such canal attractions as good food, posh apartments, exotic cars and so on. On
the other hand, Aboki 4 Christ’s resort to impress his fiancée through such material lure as taking her out on a pleasure trip to an eatery against his poor economic status reveals his pretentious life style, thus, contradicting his Christian faith that is hinged on transparency.

Aboki 4 Christ in Medicinal Laughter also satirizes the hypocritical attitudes of most pastors who lack the faith in Christ as expected of men of God. Using his place of worship as a ready example, he creates a joke of a pastor who claims to possess the spiritual power to destroy the devil even in the physical. He puts it, thus:

In my church one of my pastors, when the service is coming to an end, he will say, (mimics the pastor) ‘all of you here that are suffering from satanic oppression, you are going to shoot the devil before you go. Now you are going to bring out your spiritual gun, face the devil and shoot and you will never encounter devil again’. Every Sunday na so him dey do am. One Sunday, one militant come church to surrender him life, na im him (the pastor) the pastor say ‘let’s shoot the devil and today’s own is going to be sporadic. Now, I am going to face the altar and shoot. When I say, shoot, you are going to use me as a point of contact to shoot The devil. Now bring out your gun and begin to shoot the devil in the name of Jesus!’ Na him the militant say ‘walahi!, this devil wey dey make me dey kidnap people anyhow, I don see opportunity, I must kill am’. Na im him pick gun (mimes the sound of gun) kra ka ka kaa..Pastor dey very serious face the altar dey pray ‘shoot the devil, shoot him! Na im him hear the sound, he say (mimics pastor again) ‘hold on brethren that sound looks very familiar’. Na im him turn (on seeing a real gun) Hey! What are you doing with that gun?’ The brother say ‘the gun na to shoot the devil through you o’ Na im the pastor say ‘this is not what I mean, I mean spiritual gun’. The guy say, ‘today I must shoot the devil’ Na im the pastor say ‘ I just received a ministration that the devil did not come to church today (Medicinal Laughter, Vol. 1)

The joke above makes a mockery of the high level of hypocrisy and charlatanry amongst most pastors in Nigeria all in a bid to attract overwhelming followership. The comic spirit here lies in the exaggerations put up by the pastor in his volunteer to serve as a point of contact in his call to destroy the devil through spiritual bullets. But when the real bullet is alternated with the spiritual bullets so as to facilitate the destruction of the devil, the pastor throws in the trowel through yet another treacherous means of prophetic ministration whereby he declares that the devil is absent in church at the moment. The satirical swipe in this joke is directed at the exploitative gimmicks adopted by most Nigerian
pastors in their claim to have been waging spiritual battles for their followers. This is synonymous with the society portrayed in Wole Soyinka’s *The Trials of Brother Jero* whereby Brother Jeroboam, a charlatan leads a false life of extreme spirituality as a prophet in order to secure the devotion and patronage of his followers. It is indeed ridiculous and ludicrous for a supposed anointed man of God to waver in his prophecies. At first, he charges his congregation to wield their spiritual guns and shoot at the devil but when he hears the sound of a real gun, he intercepts the supposed spiritual warfare and declares to the congregation that the devil is no longer in the church at the moment. It is the pastor’s hypocritical and canal dispositions that make up the satirical ingredients of the joke.

The evangelical drift in *Medicinal Laughter* also manifests in the call for Christians to apply some levels of doggedness in their faith so as to attract God’s blessing. In one of his outings in a youth submit in Abuja, Aboki 4 Christ charges his audience to step up their faith in God by claiming their blessings against all odds but rather than back up his charge with biblical passages, he crafts a joke that underscores the need for Christians to persist in their demands from God, thus:

…I have one friend…his name is Emeka, he is my bosom friend. He comes to our house everyday…but the only thing that I do not like about his coming was that the only time he comes is when we are about to have our dinner. This thing dey pain me because Emeka dey short my ration. Everyday Emeka will come, he will be playing with me at the same time Emeka dey watch my mother for kitchen. Immediately my mother is dishing the food, he will walk up to my mother and say (*mimics Emeka*) ‘mummy, I don dey go o…’ My mother will say ‘Ah, Emeka don’t go, sit down with your friend let me give you food.’ This thing dey pain me but there was nothing I could do since no be me dey buy the food ko! It continued like that until one day God I come catch am for Emeka. My mama I come travel, I no know say no be only me the thing dey pain o, the thing dey follow pain my senior sister, so it was my senior sister that was to cook that day. Emeka came as usual and started playing as he saw my senior sister dishing the food inside plate, he walked up, him no know say network don go, he say (*mimics Emeka again*) ‘Aunty, I don dey go.’ Na im my sister say ‘bye bye o’ Emeka refused to go. Emeka say ‘Aunty, I don dey go na.’ My sister say ‘Emeka I have heard you. Greet your mummy for me…bye bye.’ Instead of Emeka to go, him voice change e say (*mimics Emeka as he attempts to cry*) ‘Aunty no be so your mama dey tell me o...if I tell your mama say I don dey go, she go say make I sit down make she give me food. Aunty I don dey
Emeka refused to go until his desire was granted o (Medicinal Laughter, Vol. 1)

Having ended the joke amidst boisterous laughter from the audience, Aboki 4 Christ takes a cue from the hilarious atmosphere and declares to his audience, thus: ‘this morning, you will not leave this mountain until your desire is granted’ Here, the joke serves the multiple effects of eliciting laughter from the audience, serving as a form of reminder to Christians on the need to hold tenaciously to their faith and also instilling in them, the spirit of optimism in the face of trials and tribulations. The joke is also reminiscent of the biblical story of Jacob and his encounter with an angel of God where upon Jacob grabbed the garment of the angel insisting that he would never leave the garment except the angel blesses him. In the end, Jacob receives the blessing in the same way that Emeka receives his meal from Aboki’s sister. The joke emphasizes the need for Christians to always put up optimistic attitudes towards life and that they should also get tough and dogged when necessary. Drawing from the Emeka experience, the joke admonishes Christians to be steadfast and resolute in their belief in God.

In another variety of joke, Aboki 4 Christ adopts the use of pun and alliteration to charge his audience into some form of spiritual and prophetic ecstasy. Away from the usual jokes of painting or portraying an experience, he doubles as a wordsmith by combining words that are rhythmic and yet motivational to the sensibilities of Christians in their desperation for prosperity. The joke reads, thus:

Now listen carefully. This one na reality, e fit look like stupidity. Until you accept responsibility, you cannot become a celebrity. It is your acceptability and connectivity to the laws of divinity that determines your productivity. Let me advice, let us flee from sexuality because it is act of immorality before the almighty. The devil is suffering from insanity that is why he wants to cause enmity between you and almighty by making you commit iniquity. But listen, but as for you, there is an immunity sparking like electricity for your security against satanic stupidity. You see, principality and calamity with poverty, they are satanic stupidity to strip you of your dignity but if you can embrace spirituality, regularity, punctuality, integrity and accountability, you will surely have prosperity. Permit me to remind you that you are not a nonentity. You have the capacity and the ability to destroy mediocrity and become celebrities…So if I have celebrities in this house you will make some noise… (Medicinal Laughter, Vol. 1)
The composition above transcends the confines of joke and reads more like a poem aimed at educating and encouraging Christians on how to improve on their faith level. The words used in the composition are words of regular expressions in most new generation churches since ‘prosperity’ is fundamental in their respective doctrines. The joke has high didactic intents as it admonishes Christian youths on the need to refrain from such satanic ideals as immorality, calamity, poverty, nonentity and then embrace the virtues and ideals of Christ as exemplified in prosperity, accountability, integrity and spirituality.

Conclusion

The study has succeeded in corroborating the position that the function of stand-up comedy, as a theatrical art form, transcends mere entertainment. As evident in the content and form of Aboki 4 Christ’s comic art, stand-up comedy commands high socio-religious import especially in a developing country like Nigeria where the poor masses, in search of economic and spiritual protection, patronize religious activities. The study has also branded Aboki 4 Christ as a unique Nigerian stand-up comic who has carved out a niche for himself through his consistency in the characterization of the Hausa in speech patterns and mannerisms. In course of the study, we have observed that the inculcation of stand-up comedy into church events is a subtle strategy by most pastors to create variety as well as spice up their worship patterns in order to sustain the interest of their members. We have also observed that a reasonable number of the jokes delivered by Aboki 4 Christ are drawn from biblical passages and as well ridicule religious hypocrisy amongst Christians, hence, they serve evangelical functions. Drawing from the successes recorded by Aboki 4 Christ and his colleagues such as Julius Agwu, MC Acapella and Holy Mallam in taking stand-up comedy to the church, it suffices to state unequivocally that the church is the biggest and most assuring platform for the practice of stand-up comedy in Nigeria.

It is for the foregoing that the study advocates the need for Nigerian stand-up comics to improve on the quality of comedy concerts presented in the church by crafting all their jokes around biblical stories and themes so as to give their performances in the church an undiluted religious character. In addition to crafting religious jokes, directors and producers of comedy concerts in the church should conceptualize the productions along zero tolerance for unbiblical exhibitions so as to give the concert the religious decency that is expected of the Christian church. This recommendation is made against the backdrop that some comedy concerts hosted in the churches are laced with a handful of secularized side attractions with artists wearing skimpy and revealing costumes even as they engage in erotic dance movements all in a bid to underscore the Pentecostal philosophy that stipulates that “…there is liberty in the house of God”. In view of the big market platform which the theatre has in the church, the study canvasses the need to design and inculcate ‘Church Drama’ as a course in the Theatre Arts curriculum in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The study also solicits the need for a stand-up comedy censorship mechanism in order to checkmate the infiltration of lewd and
obscene jokes to undeserving audiences. Scholars and researchers of stand-up comedy are also encouraged to undergo in-depth research in the areas of audience factor and genre classification in Nigerian stand-up comedy. This will surely occasion the rapid development of Nigerian stand-up comedy in theory and practice.

References


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