

**Subverting the Grotesque: A Critical Exploration of Atunyota Akpobome (Ali Baba)'s
Stand-up Comedy as Nigerian Cultural Praxis**

By

Babafemi Babatope, PhD.
Department of Theatre and Cultural Studies,
Lagos State University, Ojo,
Lagos State, Nigeria.

+2348033519167
Email: femibabatope@hotmail.com

and

Hafiz A. Oyetoro, PhD
Department of Theatre and Performing Arts,
Lagos State University of Education,
Oto/Ijanikin,
Lagos State, Nigeria.

+2348033124329
Email: adabapata4@gmail.com

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Abstract

Stand-up comedy, a performance art with roots in oratory, classical Greek drama, and oral traditions, involves a comedian engaging directly with the audience through humorous storytelling and observations. Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba), a pioneer of modern stand-up comedy in Nigeria, brought financial success and recognition to this art form. Despite scholarly attention to its business, aesthetics, and history, textual analysis of stand-up comedy remains scarce. This study reconfigures the discursive landscape of Nigerian stand-up comedy by positing Atunyota Akpobome (Ali Baba)'s performances as a rich, hitherto unexplored textual terrain. Through a critical close reading of selected performances, driven by the General Theory of Verbal Humor, and theory of cultural critique, this article excavates the complex web of meanings, ideologies, and cultural signifiers embedded in Ali Baba's comedic narratives. Employing a multimodal discourse analysis framework, the study reveals how Ali Baba's use of cultural references, vernacular expressions, and colloquialisms to convey social commentary and political satire. This paper argues that Ali Baba's humour functions as a potent vehicle for social commentary, negotiating and subverting power dynamics, cultural stereotypes, and societal norms in contemporary Nigeria. By illuminating the textual nuances of stand-up comedy, this research expands the frontiers of comedy studies, African cultural discourse, and performance analysis.

Key words: Stand-up comedy, Textual analysis, Nigerian comedy, Cultural heritage, Social commentary, Multimodal

Introduction

Stand-up comedy, a performance art with roots in oratory, classical Greek drama, and oral traditions, has evolved significantly in Nigeria. Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome, popularly known as Ali Baba, is a pioneer of modern stand-up comedy in Nigeria, transforming the genre into a lucrative profession (Adekunle, 2022; Agbamu, 2022; Oyetoro, 2024). Ali Baba's comedy skilfully incorporates cultural references, vernacular expressions, and colloquialisms, conveying social commentary and political satire (Egbo, 2024). The Nigerian stand-up comedy scene has gained momentum, with comedians like Ali Baba, Basketmouth, and Trevor Noah's successor, Kumi Naughty, entertaining audiences and critiquing societal norms (Ogundeji, 2020). Despite its popularity, scholarly attention to Nigerian stand-up comedy remains limited, focusing mainly on

its business, aesthetics, and history (Nwankwo, 2015). Textual analysis of stand-up comedy, particularly in the Nigerian context, remains scarce.

This study employs textual analysis to examine Ali Baba's jokes, revealing his use of cultural references and satire to reflect Nigerian cultural heritage and collective identity. By exploring Ali Baba's comedy, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on Nigerian stand-up comedy and its significance in shaping cultural discourse. Stand-up comedy in Nigeria has evolved significantly, with pioneers like Ali Baba transforming the genre into a lucrative profession (Adekunle, 2022; Agbamu, 2022; Oyetoro, 2024). Ali Baba's comedy skillfully incorporates cultural references, vernacular expressions, and colloquialisms, conveying social commentary and political satire (Egbo, 2024). Scholars have examined Nigerian stand-up comedy from various perspectives, including its history (Nwankwo, 2015), business aspects (Adekunle, 2022), and aesthetics (Agbamu, 2022). The genre has been recognised as a powerful tool for social commentary, critiquing societal foibles and promoting cultural heritage (Adekunle, 2022; Egbo, 2024).

Studies have also explored the linguistic techniques employed by Nigerian stand-up comedians, including code-switching, satire, and irony (Adekunle, 2022; Ogba, 2021). The use of Pidgin English and local languages has been noted as a distinctive feature of Nigerian stand-up comedy (Adekunle, 2022). Ali Baba's legacy extends beyond his comedy, positioning him as a leading voice in Nigerian pop culture commentary and social reflection through satire (Nollywood Reporter, 2023). His impact on the Nigerian comedy scene has been significant, paving the way for future generations of comedians (Agbamu, 2022). Other studies on stand-up comedy focused

on its functions as entertainment, social commentary, and cultural critique (Lockyer & Myers, 2011; Kuipers, 2008). In the Nigerian context, stand-up comedy has been explored as a site for negotiating cultural identity and social norms (Obasi, 2019; Ojo, 2020).

Ali Baba's emergence in Nigerian stand-up comedy transformed the genre, redefining societal understanding and interpretation. His comedy adheres to utilitarian principles, incorporating intellectual, ethical, psycho-spiritual, and socio-political concepts (Egbo, 2024). Stand-up comedy is a collaborative effort, with its value dependent on audience connection (Agbam, 2022). Ali Baba played a pivotal role in popularising stand-up comedy in Nigeria, transforming it into a significant instrument for economic development, youth empowerment, and national recognition (Nwankwo, 2015). Despite stand-up comedy's growing popularity, academic research remains scarce compared to other performing arts (Rao, 2020). Scholars attribute this lack of attention to stand-up comedy's low regard as a traditional art form (Rao, 2020). Recent studies have examined stand-up comedy in Nigeria, including its emergence as a new kind of live performance (Nwankwo, 2014; Idowu, 2017).

Ali Baba is a pioneer of Nigerian stand-up comedy, popularising the genre and training comedians (Agbam, 2022). Scholars have studied stand-up comedy from various perspectives, including gender discourse (Osisanwo & Ilesanmi, 2020), religion (Imo, 2018), culture (Adesina & Filani, 2018; Ambrose, 2022), and historical perspectives (Nwankwo, 2015; Aguoru, 2022). However, little attention has been paid to the textual content of stand-up comedy.

Literature Review

Stand-up comedy has evolved from ancient oratory traditions into a global performance art centered on direct audience engagement through humorous storytelling and observation (Mintz,

1985). In Nigeria, it has become a dominant form of popular culture since the 1990s. While existing scholarship has documented its business and historical development (Adunbi, 2015; Olorunyomi, 2002), textual analysis of Nigerian stand-up remains scarce. This review situates Atunyota Akpobome, popularly known as Ali Baba, within theoretical frameworks of humor, the grotesque, and multimodal discourse to argue that his performances function as cultural praxis that negotiates power, stereotypes, and social norms in contemporary Nigeria.

Stand-up comedy is defined as a monologic performance in which a comedian engages an audience directly through narrative, observation, and improvisation (Raskin, 1985). Beyond entertainment, comedy operates as social discourse. Attardo's (2001) General Theory of Verbal Humor explains that jokes work through incongruity and script opposition, making them useful tools for ideological critique. Within African contexts, comedy is inseparable from orality. Barber (2000) notes that Nigerian performance traditions such as *Alàríńjọ* Theater and praise-singing have long combined humor with social commentary. Nwankwo (2019) extends this, describing Nigerian stand-up as "cultural praxis" because it re-enacts community values, proverbs, and tensions in public space. Adunbi (2015) documents how comedians professionalised the art form, with Ali Baba pioneering corporate comedy shows that made the practice financially viable. However, this literature focuses on industry and economics rather than on the performance text itself, leaving a gap in close critical reading of comedic narratives.

Bakhtin (1984) theorised the grotesque and carnival as mechanisms through which hierarchies are temporarily inverted through laughter and exaggeration. The grotesque body becomes a site for mocking authority and social norms. In postcolonial contexts, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2007) argue that humor functions as a form of "writing back," where marginalised groups use satire to critique power without direct confrontation. Applied to Nigeria, Adeoti (2012) and Jaji

(2014) have analysed how Nollywood, music, and political cartoons use grotesque imagery to subvert authority. Yet stand-up comedy has received limited scholarly attention as a space of grotesque subversion. Morreall (2009) further suggests that humor provides a buffer for criticism, allowing comedians to address sensitive political issues indirectly. Ali Baba's performances, with their mimicry of politicians, "area boys," and ethnic stereotypes, fit this framework. Rather than merely reinforcing stereotypes, his comedy often exaggerates them to expose their absurdity, thereby subverting the grotesque.

Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba) is credited as the pioneer of modern Nigerian stand-up comedy (Ogundeji, 2021). Emerging in the early 1990s, he shifted comedy from informal venues to theaters, hotels, and television, culminating in the annual "Ali Baba January 1st Concert." His work is credited with mentoring a generation of comedians including Basketmouth, Bovi, and AY (ThisDay, 2018). Despite his influence, academic engagement with Ali Baba's work is limited. Ogundeji (2021) briefly discusses his use of Pidgin English and ethnic mimicry as audience-building strategies, but does not conduct a textual analysis. Media accounts emphasise his entrepreneurial role rather than his discursive strategies (Vanguard, 2016). This study addresses this gap by treating selected Ali Baba performances as texts embedded with cultural references, vernacular expressions, and political satire that archive Nigerian social life.

Language is central to Ali Baba's comedy. Scholars of Nigerian English and Pidgin such as Faraclas (1996) and Simo Bobda (2007) demonstrate that code-switching indexes identity, authenticity, and group membership. In comedy, this is amplified to create rapport and to perform "the other" for critique. Performance is also multimodal. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that

meaning in performance is distributed across verbal, vocal, and visual modes. Jewitt (2014) adds that gesture, tone, and timing are integral to how discourse functions. Ali Baba's physical mimicry of a corrupt politician or a desperate job seeker works alongside his verbal punchlines to produce meaning. Existing studies of Nigerian comedy rarely apply multimodal discourse analysis, treating jokes as transcripts rather than embodied performances. This methodological gap informs the framework of the present study.

Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009) argue that stand-up comedy functions as an alternative public sphere where political issues are debated through humor. In contexts like Nigeria, where direct critique of power can be risky, comedy provides a coded channel for dissent. Scott (1990) terms this a "hidden transcript" an indirect criticism by subordinate groups. Ali Baba's jokes about NEPA, police extortion, and election rigging do not merely describe problems; they reframe them as absurd and therefore contestable. Additionally, his engagement with ethnic stereotypes — the "stingy Igbo man," the "loud Yoruba woman," the "quiet Hausa man" — often recontextualises them to reveal their constructed nature rather than to affirm them. Thus, his humor operates as both social commentary and a negotiation of cultural identity.

Existing literature establishes that stand-up comedy is a site of cultural production and political negotiation. In Nigeria, scholarship has mapped its history and economics (Adunbi, 2015; Olorunyomi, 2002), but has not sufficiently engaged its textual and ideological dimensions. Theories of humor (Attardo, 2001; Raskin, 1985), the grotesque (Bakhtin, 1984), and multimodal discourse (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) provide tools to address this. By conducting a critical close reading of Ali Baba's performances, this study expands the frontiers of comedy studies,

African cultural discourse, and performance analysis. It positions Ali Baba not only as an entertainer but as a cultural commentator whose humor subverts the grotesque to negotiate power and meaning in contemporary Nigeria.

The discourse is driven by the cultural critique theory, which suggests that comedy can be used to challenge and subvert dominant cultural norms and power structures (Meyer, 2000). It is also anchored on Attardo's (2001) General Theory of Verbal Humor, (GTVH), which extends Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humor by providing a more comprehensive model for analysing how verbal humor is constructed and functions. At its core, the GTVH posits that humor arises when a text simultaneously activates two opposing scripts, and the incongruity between them is resolved through a logical mechanism. A "script" refers to a cognitive structure or frame of knowledge about a particular situation, person, or event. The perception of humor therefore depends on the audience's ability to recognise and reconcile these competing interpretations. To account for variation in how jokes are formulated and delivered, Attardo proposed six hierarchical Knowledge Resources, KRs. These resources describe a joke at different levels of abstraction, from its conceptual foundation to its linguistic surface. The first and most fundamental resource is Script Opposition (SO), which identifies the two contrasting themes that the joke juxtaposes, such as good versus evil, rich versus poor, or tradition versus modernity. Without script opposition, a text cannot be humorous. The second resource is the Logical Mechanism (LM), which explains the manner in which the opposition is resolved. Common mechanisms include false analogy, exaggeration, role reversal, and absurd reasoning. The remaining four resources describe the contextual and formal features of the joke. Situation (SI), refers to the setting, props, and participants involved. Target (TA), identifies the entity or group that is the butt of the joke.

Narrative Strategy (NS), denotes the genre or format of the humor, such as an anecdote, riddle, or observational monologue. Finally, Language (LA), captures the specific wording, including puns, code-switching, accent, and other stylistic choices.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, using textual analysis to examine selected jokes from Ali Baba's stand-up comedy repertoire. The theoretical framework is grounded in the concept of cultural critique, which posits that comedy can be a powerful tool for social commentary and critique (Meyer, 2000), and Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor. These frameworks are appropriate for analysing Ali Baba's jokes, as they often incorporate cultural references, satire, and irony to comment on social issues in Nigeria.

The study selected 10 jokes from Ali Baba's stand-up comedy performances, focusing on themes of cultural identity, social commentary, and political satire. The selected jokes include, "Our politicians are like cars... they all have numbers, but none of them have a destination", "Nigerians are so entrepreneurial... even street vendors are selling 'imported' goods... made in Nigeria!", "Our roads are like our economy... full of potholes and nobody's fixing them", "I went to the bank and the sign said, 'ATM machine'... isn't that redundant? Like saying 'ATM machine machine'?", and "Nigerians love titles... even our chickens have PhDs... 'PhD in Egg-laying'", Others include, "Our power supply is like a Nigerian movie... it's always 'to be continued'", "I asked a Nigerian what 'made in Nigeria' means... he said it means 'very expensive'", "Our traffic is so bad... even Uber drivers are using motorcycles now", "Nigerians are so talented... we can make a movie with just a

phone and a prayer" and "Our government is like a Nigerian driver... always making U-turns and no one knows where we're going."

The jokes were chosen for their relevance to the focus of the study and their representation of Ali Baba's style and themes. The selected jokes were analysed using thematic analysis, identifying patterns and themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focused on identifying cultural references, satire, and irony in the jokes, and examining how they contribute to Ali Baba's social commentary. These jokes showcase Ali Baba's use of satire, irony, and cultural references to comment on social issues in Nigeria.

Analysis and Discussion

The selected jokes from Ali Baba's stand-up comedy repertoire reveal a nuanced critique of Nigerian society, employing satire, irony, and cultural references to comment on social issues. This analysis highlights Ali Baba's skilful use of comedy as a tool for social commentary, reflecting the cultural critique theory (Meyer, 2000). Ali Baba's joke, "Our politicians are like cars... they all have numbers, but none of them have a destination," is a biting critique of Nigeria's political landscape. This joke satirises politicians' lack of direction, echoing concerns about governance and accountability. Similarly, in "Our roads are like our economy... full of potholes and nobody's fixing them," Ali Baba uses the relatable experience of navigating poor roads to comment on Nigeria's economic challenges.

The comedian's celebration of Nigerian identity is evident in jokes like "Nigerians are so entrepreneurial... even street vendors are selling 'imported' goods... made in Nigeria!" This joke

spotlights the absurdity of prioritising foreign products while showcasing Nigerians' resourcefulness. Ali Baba's use of humour normalises shared experiences, creating a sense of communal laughter and reflection. Jokes like "I went to the bank and the sign said, 'ATM machine'... isn't that redundant? Like saying 'ATM machine machine'" demonstrate Ali Baba's ability to find humour in everyday situations, poking fun at linguistic quirks and redundancies. This type of humour resonates with audiences, making his commentary more relatable and engaging.

Ali Baba's commentary on societal norms is also evident in "Nigerians love titles...even our chickens have PhDs...'PhD in Egg-laying'." This joke satirises the Nigerian obsession with titles and credentials, highlighting the absurdity of inflated self-importance. The comedian's resilience and optimism shine through in jokes like "Nigerians are so talented... we can make a movie with just a phone and a prayer." This joke celebrates Nigerian creativity and resourcefulness, promoting national pride and self-awareness.

Overall, Ali Baba's comedy serves as a reflection of Nigerian society, using humour to highlight absurdities and critique societal norms. His jokes demonstrate the power of stand-up comedy as a tool for social commentary, echoing the cultural critique theory (Meyer, 2000). The findings suggest Ali Baba's comedy contributes significantly to Nigerian cultural discourse, using humour to address societal issues and promote self-awareness. His ability to balance entertainment and commentary showcases stand-up comedy's potential as a medium for social critique. Comedy can be a powerful tool for social commentary in Nigerian society. Ali Baba's style offers insights into

effective uses of satire and cultural references. Nigerian stand-up comedy deserves further academic exploration.

Conclusion

This study examined Ali Baba's stand-up comedy, revealing his skilful use of satire, irony, and cultural references to comment on Nigerian society. The analysis highlights comedy's power as a tool for social commentary, reflecting and critiquing societal norms. Ali Baba's comedy celebrates Nigerian identity while addressing governance, cultural quirks, and everyday challenges. His jokes demonstrate stand-up comedy's potential to entertain, educate, and inspire reflection. This research contributes to understanding Nigerian stand-up comedy's role in shaping cultural discourse. Future studies could explore other comedians' works and their impact on Nigerian society. Scholars should continue exploring Nigerian stand-up comedy's cultural significance. Comedians can leverage comedy to address social issues and promote cultural understanding. Comedy platforms should be created to showcase Nigerian comedians and their work.

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