

STAND-UP COMEDY AS TEXT: A RE-EXAMINATION OF ATUNYOTA AKPOBOME'S (ALI BABA) SELECTED PERFORMANCES.

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Abstract

This study examines the textual dimensions of stand-up comedy, with a focus on selected performances of Atunyota Allehuya Akpobome (Ali Baba), a pioneering figure in Nigerian stand-up comedy. Stand-up comedy, a performance art with roots in oratory, classical Greek drama, and oral traditions, is explored through the lens of textual analysis. Ali Baba's contributions to the genre have facilitated financial success and social recognition for contemporary comedians. Despite scholarly attention to the business, aesthetics, and history of stand-up comedy, textual analysis remains underrepresented. Driven by Henri Bergson's theory of laughter, this paper employs content and thematic analysis to investigate the concept of text in oral performances, using selected Ali Baba's jokes as case studies. The findings indicate that Ali Baba skillfully integrates cultural references, vernacular expressions, and colloquialisms into his comedy, conveying social commentary and political satire. By celebrating Nigeria's cultural heritage, Ali Baba's comedy reflects the nation's collective identity, fostering a connection with his audience that transcends entertainment.

Keywords: Entertainment, Oral Performance, Stand-up comedy, Text, Textuality.

Introduction

The performing arts encompass a diverse range of disciplines, including acting, dance, music, acrobatics, storytelling, juggling, magic, busking, stand-up comedy, jazz, and martial arts (Koniji, 1991). These art forms are manifested in various dramatic genres, such as comedy, tragicomedy, and tragedy, and have historically expressed themselves through subgenres like mime, melodrama, satire, and burlesque. Ali Baba's emergence in the Nigerian stand-up comedy landscape significantly transformed the genre, redefining societal understanding and interpretation. Ali Baba's stand-up comedy adheres to utilitarian principles, incorporating intellectual, ethical, psycho-spiritual, and socio-political concepts. As a collaborative art

form, stand-up comedy's value depends on audience connection. Ali Baba played a pivotal role in popularising contemporary stand-up comedy in Nigeria, transforming it into a tool for national economic development, youth empowerment, and recognition.

Despite stand-up comedy's growing popularity, academic research remains scarce compared to other performing disciplines (Rao, as cited in Idowu, 2017). This lack of attention may be attributed to stand-up comedy's perceived low regard as a traditional art form. Studies by Nwankwo (2014) and Idowu (2017) have addressed this gap, examining stand-up comedy as a new form of live performance. Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba) is a pioneer of this movement, popularizing stand-up comedy in Nigeria and providing platforms for emerging comedians. This study analyzes selected texts from Ali Baba's stand-up comedy repertoire, contributing to the underrepresented area of textual content analysis in stand-up comedy research.

Previous studies have examined stand-up comedy through various lenses, including gender discourse (Osisanwo & Ilesanmi, 2020), religion (Imo, 2018), culture (Adesina & Filani, 2018; Ambrose, 2022), historical perspectives (Nwankwo, 2015; Aguoru, 2022), performer's style (Nwankwo, 2015; Idowu, 2023), and business management (Odutola, 2013). However, textual content analysis remains underrepresented.

Methodology

Driven by Henri Bergson's theory of laughter this study employed textual analysis as the primary methodology, focusing on the oral and linguistic components of Ali Baba's comedic art. Textual analysis, in this context, refers to the examination of spoken language and its meanings (Barton & Lee, 2013). The components were subjected to content and thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A maximum variation sampling approach was used to select materials from Ali Baba's appearances in various concerts, including his "January 1st Concerts" and "Lafup's Circus 2016" show. This sampling strategy allowed for the selection of jokes from shows where Ali Baba was the headliner and a show where he was featured alongside other stand-up comedians, ensuring a diverse range of performances.

Comedy: A Traditional and Varied Art Form

The term "comedy" originated from the Greek verb "komoidia," meaning "to revel" (Idowu, 2017). Comedy is a generic subset of drama that addresses human experiences and societal interactions (Dasylya, 2014). Aristotle traced comedy's origins to phallic melodies and creativity, while Dasylya distinguished between high and low comedy, giving rise to comedy of manners, humours, and intrigue comedy. Comedy is often viewed as a dramatic genre with a happy ending, serving pedagogical functions and exposing incongruity, absurdity, and foolishness (Holman, as cited in Idowu, 2017). Robert (2000) noted that comedy began as an improvised entertainment combining satirical skits, bawdy jokes, and revelry. Aristophanes' comedies featured interpersonal conflicts, topical issues, witty dialogue, and physical buffoonery (Robert, 2000).

Comedy has existed as long as human storytelling itself. From ancient rituals to modern stand-up, it adapts to culture, economy, and audience while keeping its core function - to critique, to heal, and to connect. Scholars agree that comedy is not a single form but a varied art that shifts across time and place. Comedy's roots are ritualistic. Aristotle (1996) defined comedy in the *Poetics* as an imitation of "men worse than the average," aimed at provoking laughter, thereby marking it as one of the two original dramatic modes in Ancient Greece alongside tragedy. This tradition continued through Roman *fabulae palliatae* and medieval

morality plays, where humor served social correction. In African traditions, comedy was embedded in oral performance. Finnegan (2012) noted that storytelling, masquerades, and folktales across West Africa used humor to teach morals and ease community tension. The Yoruba *alárinrin* and Hausa *maroka* performers functioned as “traditional comedians” whose roles combined entertainment with social commentary. Thus, comedy began not on a proscenium stage but in community spaces as a traditional tool for cohesion.

Modern scholarship stresses comedy's diversity. Bergson (1911) argued that laughter arises from “the mechanical encrusted upon the living,” explaining why physical slapstick, satire, and verbal wit all produce humor through different mechanisms. This explains comedy's varied forms. Satire uses exaggeration to expose folly. Abrams (1999) described satire as “artistic criticism of human vice,” seen in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*. Farce relies on improbable situations and physical humor. Esslin (1987) linked farce to economic constraints, noting that limited sets and large casts create chaos with minimal resources. Stand-up/Monologue is a direct performer-audience relationship. Double (2014) described modern stand-up as “folk art” because it adapts instantly to audience mood and local context, much like traditional praise singers. Cross-culturally, comedy varies in tone and target. Palmer (1994) compared British “understatement” with Nigerian “hyperbole” and argued that what triggers laughter is culturally coded. In depressed economies, comedy often becomes leaner and more political, as Adelugba (1987) documented in 1980s Nigerian theatre where playwrights used fewer actors but sharper satire to reflect hardship.

Across traditions, comedy does more than amuse. Freud (1960) in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* claimed humor releases repressed tension. In postcolonial societies, this function is political. Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) argued that colonized peoples used comedy to “talk back” to power without direct confrontation. This aligns with Osofisan's (2006) “theatre of commitment,” where humor disarms audiences before delivering critique. The literature shows comedy as both ancient and adaptable. Its tradition lies in ritual, correction, and community bonding, while its variety appears in form, tone, and purpose. Whether through Greek chorus, Yoruba masquerade, or modern stand-up, comedy survives because it changes shape without losing its function.

Definitions of Stand-up Comedy

Stand-up comedy is a performance genre where a comic engages the audience with humorous narratives, musical acts, and entertainment (Nwankwo, 2014). It involves a solo performer's intentionally humorous presentation on stage (Rao, 2011). Stand-up comedy is a conversation show where the audience participates and responds (Ian, 2008). Nigerian stand-up comedy has gained prominence, with comedians like Ali Baba pioneering the genre (Aguoru, 2022). Studies have examined Nigerian stand-up comedy's cultural context, language, and ideologies (Ajayi & Michael, 2019; Nneoma, 2021; Ambrose, 2022).

The Concept of Text and Textuality

Textuality refers to the characteristics of written language that render it suitable for literary analysis (Rhiney, 2010). Text encompasses original words in both written and oral formats, serving as a medium for transmitting messages (Taiwo, 2020). Theorists like Barton and Carmen (2013), Carter and Michael (2006), and Taiwo (2020) have examined text through various lenses, including digital text, literary and oral English, and oral performances. Text is a complex concept with multiple interpretations (Lotman, 1981, as cited in Taiwo, 2020). Eagleton (1981, as cited in Newton 1979) identified multiple categories of texts, while Walker (2003) highlighted the dichotomy between text and performance. Text can be defined

as the original words of information, whether written, printed, or spoken (Nordquist, 2019). Oral text is a method of spoken communication, conveying thoughts, emotions, and opinions through spoken language or oral presentations.

The terms “text” and “textuality” have moved far beyond their literal meaning of “written words on a page.” Contemporary literary and cultural theory treats “text” as any system of signs that can be read and “textuality” as the condition or quality that makes something readable. Traditionally, “text” referred to a fixed, written literary work. However, structuralist and poststructuralist theory expanded this. Saussure (2011) laid the foundation by arguing that language is a system of signs where meaning comes from differences, not fixed reference. This shifted “text” from a physical object to a network of relationships. Barthes (1977) made the decisive break in “From Work to Text.” He distinguished the work as a closed, author-centered object, from the text as a “methodological field” that is open, plural, and activated by the reader. For Barthes (1977), “a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning... but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings... are blended and contested.” Thus, text is no longer an object but a process. Derrida (1976) pushed this further in *Of Grammatology* by claiming “there is nothing outside the text.” He referred to “text” as all cultural practices, institutions, and actions that can be “read” and interpreted. In this view, a protest, a dress code, or a ritual becomes a “text” (Derrida, 1976).

If “text” is the object/process, “textuality” refers to the qualities that allow it to function as text. Kristeva (1980) introduced “intertextuality,” arguing that every text is a “mosaic of quotations” that absorbs and transforms other texts. Textuality, therefore, is the property of being woven from prior texts. No text is original or self-contained. Lotman (1990) added a semiotic dimension in *Universe of the Mind*. He defined textuality as the ability of any cultural phenomenon to create meaning through internal structure and external boundaries. A film, a city, or a myth has textuality because it organizes signs into a coherent system that an audience can interpret. In literary studies, textuality also involves materiality and context. McGann (1991) argued in *The Textual Condition* that “text” includes typography, editing, and publishing history. A 1988 WAEC slip with CD90 is a text not only because of the words, but because of its layout, codes, and institutional context that make it readable as a “result.”

The concept has since expanded into cultural studies and digital media. Hall (1997) applied textuality to media, stating that TV programs, images, and advertisements are “texts” that audiences decode within cultural frameworks. In digital theory, Landow (1992) described hypertext as the ultimate form of textuality: non-linear, linked, and reader-driven, which actualizes Barthes’ idea of the “writerly text.” African scholarship also reframes textuality. Irele (2001) argued that orality in African cultures represents a form of textuality where performance, gesture, and audience response are part of the “text.” Thus, a Yoruba folktale or masquerade performance is a “text” with its own textuality, even without writing. Thus there is a clear trajectory in its progression. “Text” has moved from a static written work to any signifying system, while “textuality” names the features that make meaning and interpretation possible. Key insights are that texts are plural, interwoven, and context-dependent, and that textuality exists wherever humans create meaning.

Oral Text, Performance and Theme as Literary Concept

Oral performances, like Ali Baba's stand-up comedy, possess intrinsic literary elements and serve as entertainment (Richards, 2018). Ali Baba's speech is imbued with subtext, symbolic

language, and poetic quality, warranting critical inquiry. Theme refers to the significant intellectual concept that arises from the exploration of a literary work's content (Griffith, 2010). It is the principal concept in a narrative, conveying the writers' or performers' social and psychological perceptions, worldview, and belief system. Theme offers insights into characters' struggles, endeavours, discoveries, and emotions, articulating the author's perspectives on life (Bergson, 1911).

Theme is the cohesive and unifying element that makes a literary work or performance meaningfully complete and satisfying (Wei Jing, 2015). It guides the listener/reader towards the upcoming message and establishes a structure for interpretation. Theme typically contains familiar information, is universal, and represents concepts that extend beyond specific characters and events (Scopa Sally, 2017). Theme underpins the message, encompasses content aligned with textual development, and facilitates coherent discourse (Kang, 2016). It explores universal, socio-historical, psycho-cultural, spiritual, and philosophical concepts that can be deciphered. Theme contributes artistic worth and enriches the contextual meaning of the text or performance. Themes can be classified as main or minor. The main theme is the central idea, while minor themes support or highlight the main idea.

Texts of Ali Baba's Comedy

Ali Baba's stand-up comedy is influenced by Henri Bergson's theoretical propositions, which posit that laughter is inherent to individuals who can laugh and be laughed at. His humour is universally relatable, yet culturally nuanced; making it a prime example of Bergson's philosophy of laughter (Brain, 2004). Ali Baba began his professional stand-up comedy career in 1993 with *Ali Baba Hiccuppuray 3rd*. He performed at events, corporate gatherings, and television shows, including appearances with celebrities like Danladi Bako and Bisi Olatilo. His notable events include Opa Williams' Nite of a Thousand Laughs and the Ali Baba January 1st Concert Series (thenollywoodreporter.com)

Ali Baba's comedy employs various techniques, including; language devices such as wordplay, puns, and satire in Nigerian Pidgin English and colloquial terms. It employs cultural references which includes anecdotes and commentary on Nigerian society, politics, and culture. It employs social satire for implicit criticism of corruption, gender dynamics, and socio-economic inequalities. An example of his comedy text is the joke "Do you know that a Yoruba man and his car are one? They are not separate entities either. That is why you hear a Yoruba man say 'tyre mi ti baje', 'My tyre is terrible', not the car's tyre ooo" (Ali Baba, 2020).

Traditional literary theory treated "text" as written literature only. Poststructuralist theory expanded this. Barthes (1977) argued that a "text" is any multi-dimensional space of signs activated by the reader, not just printed words. Applying this, stand-up comedy qualifies as text because it is a system of verbal, vocal, and gestural signs that audiences "read" and interpret. Akpobome, popularly known as Ali Baba, delivers performances that exist beyond the moment of utterance - through YouTube recordings, transcripts, memes, and audience retellings. These afterlives make his routines "texts" with textuality, i.e., the quality of being open to interpretation, repetition, and intertextual reference (Kristeva, 1980).² Atunyota Akpobome's Performances as Cultural Texts

Ali Baba's comedy, especially routines from *Spontaneity 2007* and *X-treme Measures 2013*, functions as social text in Nigeria's post-SAP economy. His jokes on NEPA, "419" fraud, and corrupt politicians are not just punch lines but coded commentary on survival. This aligns with Gilbert and Tompkins' (1996) claim that postcolonial performers use humor to "talk

back” to power without direct confrontation. For example, his repeated riff on “light will come, but not today” becomes a textual symbol of deferred national progress. The audience’s laughter is the act of “reading” and agreeing with the critique. From a semiotic view, Lotman (1990) argued that cultural phenomena have textuality when they create meaning through structure and context. Ali Baba’s set structure - setup, exaggeration, punch line, audience callback - forms a stable textual structure. Yet the content shifts with Nigeria’s economic reality, proving his routines have adaptive textuality like oral literature (Finnegan, 2012).

Ali Baba’s jokes quote Nollywood lines, pidgin proverbs, and politicians’ speeches. Kristeva (1980) stated no text is original; all texts are “mosaics of quotations.” When Ali Baba mimics a “corrupt minister,” he inter-textually references real public figures, making the audience co-authors of meaning. McGann (1991) insisted that textuality includes material conditions - voice tone, pause, facial expression. Ali Baba’s use of silence before a punch line, or his shift to “Lagos aunty” voice, is part of the text. A transcript alone loses meaning. The recorded performance is the full text. Barthes (1977) declared “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.” In Ali Baba’s shows, audience shouts of “Ehen!” and call-and-response complete the text. Without audience reaction, the joke is incomplete. This makes his stand-up a “writerly text” where meaning is co-produced live.

Re-examining Ali Baba through textual theory reveals that stand-up comedy is not “low art” but complex textual practice. In a depressed economy, his performances become what Adelugba (1987) called “theatre of necessity” - lean, direct, and socially urgent. The “text” of Ali Baba is therefore not just the words, but the economic context, pidgin language, and audience survival strategies encoded in the laughter.

Viewing Ali Baba’s selected performances as text allows scholars to analyze stand-up with the same rigor applied to drama or poetry. His comedy proves that textuality exists wherever meaning is made, performed, and received. In Nigeria’s economic context, Ali Baba’s stage becomes both archive and critique - a living text of the Nigerian experience.

Ali Baba's comedy provides entertainment and stimulates discourse on critical societal topics, making him a comedy innovator. His performances are a medium for examining and contesting societal norms, provoking critical thinking among his audience (ajol.infoguardian.ng&thenollywoodreporter.com)

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy is a socio-cultural practice that creatively propagates culture, serving as a form of artistic expression within the performing arts (Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome, personal communication, 2020). It must fulfill essential functions, including entertainment, education, and information dissemination. Practitioners must amalgamate talent with intentionality to create valuable stand-up comedy. Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba) is a pivotal figure in Nigerian stand-up comedy, transforming the genre's form and substance. His comedy serves as a significant medium for awareness, personal economic emancipation, and national development.

Textual analysis of Ali Baba's work reveals the use of semantic codes that are inherently Nigerian, reflecting linguistic particularity and cultural nuances. His comedy often treats scenarios with sociological significance, reflecting urban Nigerian cities and realities. The paper recommends the incorporation of stand-up comedy into the curriculum as a distinct course in the performing arts. Government should facilitate the provision of financial

assistance to practitioners to foster originality and development. Researchers should conduct further studies on textuality in Nigerian stand-up comedy to inform teaching and composition. They should study the influence standup comedy on other arts and the cultural economy.

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