

Izue Nwankwo (ed.)

**Stand-up Comedy in Africa:
Humour in Popular Languages and Media**

With a foreword by Ebenezer Obadare

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| Acknowledgements..... | 5 |
| Foreword by <i>Ebenezer Obadare</i> | 9 |

Introduction

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Izue Nwankwo</i> Old Wine in a New Bottle: Stand-up Comedy and its Dispersal across Africa | 11 |
|---|----|

Part I: Resisting and Reinventing the *Status Quo*

| | |
|---|----|
| <i>Daria Tunca and Izue Nwankwo</i> Confronting Racism and Colonialism in Cécile Djunga’s and Trevor Noah’s Stand-up Comedy | 45 |
|---|----|

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Jennalee Donian</i> South African Vernacular Stand-Up Comedy as Performative Resistance | 67 |
|--|----|

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Ken Lipenga Junior</i> The People’s Joker: The Popularity of Mr Jokes’ Stand-up Comedy in Malawi..... | 89 |
|--|----|

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Nkechi Okadigwe and Amany El-Sawy</i> Resisting Shame and the Male Gaze: Humour Evocations in the Acts of Noha Kato and Real Warri Pikin..... | 109 |
|--|-----|

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Ibukun Osuolale-Ajayi</i> Discourse and Humour Strategies in Two-Person Stand-up Art in Nigeria | 127 |
|--|-----|

Part II: Circumventing Censorship and Taboo

Ebtesam Mohamed El-Shokrofy
In the Shadow of the 1994 Genocide: Arthur Nkusi
and Stand-up Comedy in Rwanda..... 151

Danson Sylvester Kahyana
The Afterlife of Ugandan Stand-up Comedy: Examining the
Multiple Roles and Jocular Devices of Teacher Mpmamire..... 171

Nohayer E. Lotfy
Scripted and Non-Scripted Humour in Stand-up Comedy:
Techniques of Egypt's Comedian Ali Quandil..... 193

Charles Kebaya
Reinventing Taboo in Kenyan Stand-up Comedy 213

Part III: Mechanics of being a Comedian

Rowland Chukwuemeka Amaefula
Africa on the British Stage: Laughter-Making Mechanics of
Andi Osho and Daliso Chaponda..... 229

Robin K. Crigler
There's No Such Thing as 'Too Soon' Here: Taking Stock of
South Africa's Comedy Boom..... 249

Jacqueline Ojiambo
The Many-Sides of Kenyan Stand-up Comedy: A Stylistic
Interrogation of the Acts of Jemutai, Professor Hamo and
Oga Obinna 271

Ignatius Chukwumah
Nigeria's The Mock News with Pararan: The Poetics of its
Punchline 291

About the Contributors..... 311

Endorsements..... 315

Foreword

By all indications, Africans should have little to laugh about. The economy, in the doldrums and, minus a handful of exceptions, trending southward for as long as anyone can remember, offers nary a cause for cheer. The politics has been no different. For all the positivity that greeted the embrace of democratic rule in the early 1990s, the familiar pattern of gross unaccountability and casual plunder has proved resilient. How, given the prevailing gloom, can Africans continue to laugh?

Studies about other regions of the world, and tellingly among those on the social margins, confirm that this paradox – of apparent gaiety amid despondency – is not unique to Africa. In those communities, be it in Colombo, Rio de Janeiro or Cape Town, laughter is the first and ultimate proof of people’s humanity, and the jokes they exchange, whether or not intended as such, are the first line of resistance against the savage brutalities of everyday life. The answer, therefore, to the question of how Africans can afford to laugh is that they laugh not because they are insensitive to pain, but because they are human, and thus, they recognise absurdity, and know that laughter, as a popular Yoruba saying goes, is the only riposte to an issue or a situation so grim that grieving is inadequate. Here, one laughs in the face of sorrow.

There is a familiar worry that those who insist on confronting degradation with jollity may be prone to political apathy. If everything is regarded with levity, the thinking goes, why would politics, a matter of life and death apparently, be regarded with the seriousness it deserves? It’s not an unreasonable fear, but it misses the point nonetheless. For one thing, there is scant evidence that people cannot be jolly and politically serious at the same time. Politics – whether as issues or personalities – frequently provides the material backdrop and target of the most devastating humour. Generally speaking, strategies of political resistance are hardly ever mutually exclusive. Second, anxiety misses the point of laughter, which admittedly is not simply political defiance or contempt. If Orwell is right that ‘Every joke is a tiny political revolution’, those for whom

humour is the ultimate weapon are nothing but political revolutionaries.

Wondering how people manage to laugh in the face of unrelenting political assault is one thing; puzzling at the explosion of stand-up comedy across Africa is another. With the former, one ponders the question of social resilience among agents desperate to rescue and preserve dignity and self-worth; with the latter, one launches a sociological inquest into the emergence and diverse facets of an industry that has taken full advantage of all the affordances of the emergent techno-media.

Rigorously edited, *Stand-up Comedy in Africa* is a timely, interdisciplinary survey of an art form whose ubiquity prompts sundry technical, artistic, and political questions. For those seeking critical guidance on the ethics and praxes of popular performance in Africa, this is as good a place as any to start.

Ebenezer Obadare

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