Hilarity and the Nigerian Condition

by

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Abstract

This essay develops a hilarious perspective on the Nigerian postcolonial predicament. This perspective presumes not only that there is a comic dimension to the socio-political situation in Nigeria, but also that a pragmatic confrontation with this situation requires the hilarious—laughing it out—which preserves the health of the body while the political health of the state is being crafted. This perspective of *laughing at* the Nigerian situation does not equate *laughing with* the predicament. While the latter is a complicitous laughter borne out of powerlessness; the former is therapeutic and critical, and it is so not only for its unburdening function, but also for its capacity for social criticism which arguably injects a social consciousness of the collective situation within the laughing space of the individual.

The Politics of Suffering and Smiling

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the late maverick Afro beat musician, still enjoys critical immortality not only for his trenchant social analysis of the Nigerian and African predicament, but also because of the protracted relevance of his analysis. In his album—*Shuffering and Shmiling* (Suffering and Smiling—1978)—he lamented the pathological timidity of a followership that allows citizens to acquiesce in the mis-governance of Nigeria, especially through the instrumentality of religion. What then is the politics of this "shuffering and shmiling"? It is this: That the elites, both spiritual and political, are complicit in the disenfranchisement of the Nigerian underclass. Thus, for Fela,

Every day my people dey inside bus
    [My people commutes daily in the bus]
Every day my people dey inside bus
Forty-nine sitting, ninety-nine standing
Them go pack themselves in like sardine
    [They pack themselves tight like canned sardines]
Them dey faint, them dey wake like cock
    [They faint and daily wake up like cock]
Them go reach house, water no dey
    [When they get home, there isn't water]
Them go reach bed, power no dey
    [When they get ready for bed, there is no electricity]
Them go reach road, go-slow go come
    [When they get on the road, there is unceasing traffic jam]
Them go reach road, police go slap
    [When they get on the road, there is policy brutality]
Them go reach road, army go whip
    [When they get on the road, there is army brutality]
Them go look pocket, money no dey
    [When they check their pocket, it lacks purchasing power]
Them go reach work, query ready
    [When they eventually get to work, summons and queries are waiting]

All these compilation of woes would suggest a recipe for revolution. This is because this is the way "E dey happen to all of us everyday [they happen to us everyday]". Yet, about thirty seven years after Fela made his diagnosis of our common situation, the desired revolution had still not occurred. Rather than react radically, we have only been able to manage a complicitous cheerfulness enabled by the otherworldly hope of a better deal in the hereafter. Why is this cheerfulness wrong?

Let me illustrate this question with a somewhat bittersweet experience. The "somewhat" would appear to be the eventual key to answering the question. Some few years ago, I had to deliver some amount of money to someone in Lagos, Nigeria. I dropped at Ojuelegba and was making my way towards Lawanson, my destination. All of a sudden, a plainclothesman accosted me and surreptitiously flashed a battered identity card signaling he was a "policeman". The normal fear of the police forced me to standstill in spite of my suspicion of his identity. I moved to the side of the road where I saw about three other pedestrians undergoing a similar "stop and search" experience. The "policeman" then commenced a thorough search of my bag, and it didn't take him too long to discover the money I had with me. Again, in spite of my fear, I thought it shouldn't be a crime to have such an amount of money with me. I was wrong!

The "policeman" subsequently further "discovered" a "fake" receipt for a desktop I recently purchased. Not minding my explanation about the provenance of the receipt, I was immediately bundled into a commandeered van where I came face to face with stern-looking, gun-toting others. One of them looked at me seriously and said: "You no know say na serious crime to carry a fake receipt around? [Don't you know it's a serious offense to carry fake receipt about?]" I promptly replied, with my heart already looking for a way out of my chest, that it wasn't a fake receipt but one I was issued when I purchased the computer system. My explanation was cut short with a gruff: "You know what to do." I actually knew what to do in such a compromised situation, yet I was so confused that I blurted out: "I don't know what to do!" The "policemen" read it as a stubborn declaration; it was actually a lamentation. "If you no know wetin you go do, then you go follow us reach our station! [If you don't know what to do, then be ready to follow us to the police station!]"

It was very surprising to me in that situation that my mind could react with swift mental clarity to the danger of following them to the "police station"? I quickly came to three critical conclusions: One, the "policemen" didn't understand my confusion about knowing what to do; two, they are aware of the huge sum of money in my bag; and three, I may disappear on the way to the "police station". Without much ado, I dug into my pocket and parted with a thousand naira. Thereafter, I was asked to go with a stern warning not to carry "fake" receipt around again. When I was a safe distance away from the "stop and search" operation, I looked back and deep at the ridiculousness of the whole situation, the people going about their "normal" business while daylight robbery was been perpetuated, and the equal daring of the daylight robbers. I didn't really know where the laughter came from given my recent ordeal, but I laughed! And then I walked away, still laughing.

How then to diagnose my reaction to the entire situation? How was I different from those who have also joyously surrendered to the situation, and then, may be, cast their eyes to the heavens? Would it have been different if I had smiled, shook my head sardonically, and then walked away? Maybe. Max Beerbohm, in analysing the essay of Bergson on laughter, made a subtle distinction between laughter and a smile. According to him, "There is no dignity in laughter; there is much of it in smiles. Laughter is but a joyous surrender, smiles give token of mature criticism."[1] Fela would no doubt disagree with this distinction to the extent that both are unjustified in the face of injustice. I also disagree to the extent that laughter is regarded as hapless acquiescence or joyous surrender.

Laughter, it seems to me, can achieve more than "rollick on the high planes of fantasy or in depth of silliness"[2] or even more significantly lose touch with reality. I argue that laughter possesses the epistemic capacity of knowing or making aware. In this sense, it becomes difficult to be dissolved, as it were, into a paroxysm of hysterical and jarring laughter that actually turns one into the object of the laughter. It is on the basis of this *epistemic* laughter that we can draw the distinction between "laughing at" and "laughing with".

It is the former which is relevant for us in this essay because it excites our "sense of the ridiculous" with regard to the political elites and the Nigerian predicament. The latter is merely a mode of escape that gives vent to the impotent and dark thoughts within.[3] Let us next see how the Nigerian predicament generates in us this sense of the ridiculous.

The Nigeria Predicament as Farce

Reading the Nigerian situation as a farce will turn out to be an ambivalent one. This is because most Nigerians will not see the farcical dimension of the predicament. Laughing does not really come easy in the face of socio-economic travails. It would seem that the *laughter space* is also an ambivalent one which exercises a pull-push effect on us: The socio-political situation of the country is at an all-time height of the ridiculous that demands hilarity, yet it seems equally difficult to laugh.

In what follows, I will highlight the postcolonial predicament of the Nigerian state and its farcical dimension. To do this, I will appropriate Achille Mbembe's idea of the post-colony as my entry point into the analysis of how the postcolonial situation could generate the hilarious. My hypothesis therefore is that as a captive of the colonial entrapment, Nigeria's attempt at making sense of its "(post)-colonial space" has inevitably led to a melodrama of ridiculous, and hence laughable, proportion.

It will not be difficult to read Nigeria's 50-year post-independence political history as that of an *entanglement*: a complicated evolution made up of "discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another."[4] A temptation we should not fall into, however, is interpreting the post-colony solely as a function of colonial manipulations to which the African intellectuals and nationalists had to comply almost inevitably with unthinking alacrity. Rather, such an entanglement, in a significant sense, could be read as the consequence of a mutual inventiveness of the post-colony;[5] a function of the colonial calculation foresighted into the post-colony as well as the political activities of the Nigerian national elites in their eagerness for political independence. In other words, rather than seeing the post-colony in a unilinear fashion as the sole invention of colonialism, it is better to see it as a function of the collective inventiveness of the colonial and Nigerian elites. The Nigerian post-colony could thus properly be read as a "complex world of inventions" in which the socio-economic and political activities of the Nigerian leadership complicated the bequeathed colonial framework.[6]

Given the crucial point that many anti-colonial responses are possible within the constraints of colonial discourse, it therefore becomes appropriate to argue that the Nigerian post-colony betrays the unpalatable consequences of an uncritical and naïve acquiescence with the colonial framework of rule and organisation.[7] Zachernuk, for example, argues that

> …while postwar Nigerian political history progressed along an apparently linear path toward the realization of self-government, Nigerian intellectual history did not follow a parallel trajectory. All but overwhelmed by their exposure to new ideas and conditions, the intelligentsia on the eve of independence lost sight, at least temporarily, of much of their earlier tradition.[8]

This tradition was that of a radical opposition to the programme of colonialism under the umbrella of pan-Africanism. There was, however, a growing shift away from this pan-racial solidarity towards a more "Nigerian" nationalist rhetoric. "The promise of imminent economic and political power" not only produced a "colonial contentment," it also "drew the intelligentsia more closely and uncritically toward a seductive new discourse on democracy, development, and nation-building provided not only by Fabians but in British policy and the United Nations."[9]

The naïve and uncritical alacrity with which the Nigerian elites wielded the imported implements of "constitution mongering" left by the departing colonialists, as if they fit all postcolonial circumstances, made their post-independent task more daunting and confusing. This task involved: "defining Nigeria against the world while finding its inner connections."[10] 50 years after independence, the Nigerian leadership are still finding those inner connections. As it were, the Nigerian leadership is trapped between the *promises* of colonial independence and the *surprises* of postcolonial circumstances. How then did the colonial invention of postcolonial Nigeria produce simultaneously "terror, astonishment and hilarity" in Mbembe's words?

The colonial situation produced a specific "life world"—what Mbembe calls the post-colony—which is constituted by "a set of material practices, signs, figures, superstitions, images, and fictions that, because they are available to individuals' imaginations and intelligence and actually experienced, form what might be called 'languages of life'."[11] Essentially, for Mbembe, the post-colony is a given historical trajectory of those "societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves."[12] We can therefore conceive of it as "a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes":

> The post-colony is characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and lack of proportion, as well as by distinctive ways identities are multiplied, transformed, and put into circulation. But the post-colony is also made up of a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery that, once in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence. In this sense, *the post-colony is a particularly revealing, and rather dramatic, stage on which are played out the wider problems of subjection and its corollary, discipline*.[13]

The dramatic dimension of the (Nigerian) post-colony will soon become obvious. Suffice it to say that this constitution of the post-colony inevitably leads to a grotesque proportion which could not but stir in the citizens, even in their subjection, a deep sense of the ridiculous.

Mbembe identifies two characteristic features of the post-colony in Africa. On the one hand, it generates state power—or the *commandment*—which is the sole instrumentality in the subjection of the citizens. How does this operate? This state power (1) "creates, through administrative and bureaucratic practices, its own world of meaning—a master code that, while becoming the society's primary central code, ends by governing, perhaps paradoxically, the logics that underlie all other meanings within that society; (2) attempts to institutionalize this world of meanings as a 'socio-historical world' and to make that world real, turning it into a part of people's 'common sense' not only by instilling it in the minds of the…'target population,' but also by integrating it into the period's consciousness."[14]

The second characteristic of the post-colony is its capacity to be "chaotically pluralistic." In its attempt to create a system of meaning that will make the discipline of the target population possible, state power in the post-colony ends up creating a multiplicity of public spaces resulting from the equal attempt by the people to make sense of their collective predicament; their attempt, that is, to "rewrite the mythologies of power".[15] The one dominant public space it desires to enthrone is therefore bifurcated into several other public spaces with their own logics and common sense, enabling the postcolonial subjects to bargain with state power in this "conceptual marketplace." I will be arguing shortly that the "laughing space" is one of the most significant public spaces created in this bargaining procedure.[16]

This mismanagement of the constitution of space is further heightened by the manifestation of excess and magnificence of state power. An aspect of the "common sense" generated by *commandment's* regime of public meanings has to do with the corruptive excesses in the appropriation of public fund. Corruption and the personal definition of public offices therefore achieve their own rationality as the sure means to a total escape from the permanent possibility of poverty in the post-colony. This rationality creates its own obscene majesty and magnificence as the standard common sense in the fight against poverty. It is this constant search for prestige and majesty that, within the context of the possibility of manipulating the law, leads inexorably to the grotesque excess in the extravagant use of power.

The irony, however, is that the attempt at magnificence by the postcolonial leadership only demonstrate its debauchery and buffoonery. It displays for the postcolonial subjects the hollowness of the regime as a "regime of unreality,"[17] a fabricated and authoritarian institution with no force of genuineness locatable in its concerns for the common good. Indeed, the first manifestation of the crystallization of the state as a "technology of power" is the willful neglect of the demands of the contract between ruler and the ruled. The subjects, however, also have a unique avenue for revealing the "mythologies of power" for the sham they are. Hilarity, in this crucial sense, becomes a critical means for deconstructing the mystique of domination.

While the postcolonial state has the capacity, as we have seen, to generate terror and astonishment in the subjects, it also unwittingly generate a unique public—a laughing space—dedicated to unraveling the buffoonery of the dominant. From Mbembe's analysis of the post-colony, political derision becomes a very subtle confrontation with the violence of the *commandment*. According to him, "To a large extent, the outburst of ribaldry and derision are actually taking the official world seriously, at face value or the value, at least, it gives itself."[18] The hollowness of state power therefore enables the constitution of a "laughing space" as a space which makes it possible to poke fun at the melodramatic grotesqueness of the *commandment* "outside the limit set by officialdom." That "unofficial space" thus allows ordinary citizens to "(1) *stimulate* adherence to the innumerable official rituals that life in the post-colony requires—such as wearing uniforms and carrying the party card, making public gestures of support and hanging portraits of the autocrat in one's home; (2) say the unsayable and to recognize the otherwise unrecognizable."[19]

The catch in Mbembe's analysis of hilarity is that while acknowledging the significance of hilarity in the configuration of the post-colony, he argues that it plays only a secondary and hence subordinate role to the crucial issue of the nature and operation of the *commandment*:

> The question of whether humor in the post-colony is an expression of "resistance" or not, whether it is, a priori, opposition, or simply manifestation of hostility toward authority, is thus of secondary importance. For the most part, those who laugh are only reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the *commandement*.[20]

Yet, it seems to me that the logic of his analysis of the conviviality in the process of zombification of the dominant and the dominated would suggest, otherwise, that humour ought to be more significant in the postcolonial arrangement. Those whose sense of the ridiculous has been excited by the buffoonery of state power—and are therefore laughing at it—are doing much more than just "reading the signs left, like rubbish, in the wake of the *commandment*." It would seem that the dominated, by laughing at the *commandment*, are deconstructing not only its limitations, but also their own participation in it. Their laughter generates a *comic philosophy*. The next section will examine the mechanics of this philosophy.

Laughter as Philosophy and Subversion: Evaluating Nigerian Comic Art

It is possible, even convenient, given Mbembe's analysis of hilarity, to read the fast developing comic industry in Nigeria as an "unintentional" attempt not only to escape from the violence of state power, but also to deflate its cosmology. But that, I argue, would be too convenient an analysis. Let me illustrate.

In *Basket Mouth Uncensored 2*, the Nigerian stand-up comedian, Basket Mouth, made a joke about the serious and difficult nature of jokes created at the expense of the Nigerian situation. He began the comedy session thus:

> First of all, I'll like to say doing comedy is difficult. Sincerely. Most times, most comedians…go on stage, they wan crack jokes [attempt to crack jokes]. E dey their mind o [they have the jokes in their minds]. Their hopes be say e go funny [and they hope it will make you laugh]. But na una go make dem look like say dem no funny most times [it is you the audience that creates the impression that the jokes ain't funny]…. Nigerian problems large. As all of una dey here so [you are all here with your various problems], some of una dey wey jus catch your babes with somebody else [some just caught their girlfriends with another man], some of una dey wey jus lose jobs [some of you just lost your jobs], some of una dey wey e be say dem jus tief him car [some of you even just had your cars stolen]. Different problems. So, most times when dem crack joke wey funny anytime the comedian cracks a joke], una go wan laugh [but] you go come remember the problems [you'll attempt to laugh, but then remember these problems]. If the guy jus crack the joke [you'll be like] "eehh, eehh…" [then you deflate immediately because you remember] "oohh, this problem". So, there is no Nigerian comedian who is not funny.[21]

This analysis, from a typical Nigerian comedian, outlines the critical involvement of the Nigerian masses in the laughter space created by the commandment. A typical Nigerian comedy or comedy show is usually a mixture of the obvious entertainment value, and the normal day-to-day ribaldry which also, simultaneously, adopts a moralising dimension. The most popular feature however is the political content. Watching a typical Opa Williams' *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* demonstrates this political embeddedness of Nigerian comedy. That was partly the point Basket Mouth was making at the opening session of his show. That was also the conclusion we derived from the analysis of how political derision outflow from the debauchery and buffoonery of state power in the post-colony.

Given the nature of the post-colony, it becomes inevitable that a space be created outside the ambit of state power and violence where the excesses of the commandment could be derided. Thus, most Nigerian comedians have made a huge trade and created equally huge humour out of, for instance, a common experience of poverty. Let us call these species of comedy and comic forms, *the humour of the irresponsibles*.[22]

These jokes speak to the irresponsible political shiftlessness of the Nigerian leadership and political elites as well as the stagnancy of the Nigerian state. In other words, this set of comic strips explores all the funny dimensions of the "total lack of restraint" manifested in the activities of powerful elites in the bid to demonstrate government's virility. In this equation, therefore, governmental excesses result in the impoverishment of the citizenry. Hear Basket Mouth again:

> You see, my growing up was terrible. Those days wey we jus start, thins rough well well [Taking this career off the ground was a rough endeavour]. I keep saying it. No be say e rough to the point wey person fit die [Not that it was all that terrible]. But it was bad. It was bad. And my dad happens to be that kin person [wey] no send [My dad was grossly irresponsible]. Popsy no jus send anybody [He just didn't care]. Seven children, him and my mum, nine of us inside house [T entire family, nine in numbe, all in one room]. One room, one parlour. Now, we never chop food finish, him come go buy dog [While we're still trying to make ends meet, he bought a dog]. Normally, if you have a dog, the dog supposed dey eat Pedigree and all those stuff [On a normal day, a dog ought to eat normal dog food]. We never even fit chop [But we have not even had enough to eat]. Now, we pako people, we give dogs leftovers, right? Now no leftovers because the food too small and we no dey eat three-square meal, you understand [We poor people only manage to give our dogs leftovers; but in this situation, there wasn't even any leftovers for the dog]. Na once in a while [It only come once in a while for the dog]. And what we eat is not for dogs [What we manage to eat is not even for dogs]. We drink garri [cassava flour] and beans, akara and ogi [bean cake and pap], beans and plantain—sometimes we dey eat beans and moin moin [We sometime take beans and a derivation of beans paste]. It's that bad. The dog come dey follow us dey eat all these food; come dey sick human beings sickness: e dey get catarrh, headache, cough [Since the dog had to eat these abnormal food, it also began to develop abnormal sickness strange to dogs]. After like two years, him get stroke out of too much thinking [The dog eventually died of a stroke resulting from mental fatigue].[23]

Within comedy and real life situation in Nigeria, poverty also has a regional dimension. Comedians usually turn to Ajegunle and Warri—two notorious and impoverished places in Nigeria—to exemplify their poor condition. Eboh Bomb corroborates Basket Mouth:

> Many comedians dey talk of poverty, [but] the one wey I experience for our house, dat one get grade [Though many comedians have made jokes about poverty, the one I have experienced in my house is top grade]. My Pa, dat one born 28 children, and na for inside two rooms e born us put [My father has twenty eight children, all in two rooms]. I get two sister, dem don grow hoping say dem go marry [I have two sisters we were all hoping will make room for us by getting married]. Dem born five children join us for the two rooms [Yet, etween them, they gave birth to five children and added to the number]. If we wan sleep, we dey lap each other sleep [When we go to ed in the night, we lap one another in sleep]. Poverty…. You no say if kwashiorkor newly dey come, the thin be like enjoyment: your jaw go dey big, belle go dey swell up [You that when kwashiorkor begins to freshly manifest, it appears like well-being]. The only thin be say your neck no go dey get weight according to your jaw [The only difference is that with kwashiorkor, your neck wont be able to carry the weight of your neck]. I say kwashiorkor dey hold me, all my stupid friends dem for Warri come dey see me dey tell me say "Bomb, you are flexing, look at your stomach!" [When I became afflicted with kwashiorkor, all my friends at Warri saw my protruding tummy and thought I was enjoying] Dem no no say I wan die now! [They didn't know I was very near the grave][24]

The point which was not obvious to Basket Mouth, however, is that he had unwittingly pointed at the ambivalence of the laughing space and the self-reflexive philosophy it creates. Comedy, I will be arguing, not only points outside of itself, it points at itself too (or rather its audience). Nigerian comedy does not only x-ray the character of the Nigerian post-colony, it also analyses itself as a function—a fabrication—of that post-colony which it pokes fun at. It was this crucial point that Mbembe glosses over in reading hilarity as just a secondary phenomenon that merely reads the signs in the wake of the commandment. Within this laughing space, it becomes convenient to laugh at the stupid antics of the dominant in the society. But then, in the midst of the laughter an awareness of our own complicity almost always looms in the background to interrupt the delight value. In laughing at the excesses of government, comedy calls on a political memory whose purpose is to make the present more obstinate and reproving in the consciousness of the people who are laughing. We therefore see the joke for what it is: An indictment of the Nigerian predicament and our conviviality and conformity with it.

The most convenient conceptual in which comedy has been fitted is in terms of its capacity to relieve the tension generated by the vicissitudes of life. Israel Knox defines it as "playful chaos in a serious [and coercive] world."[25] Such a world is characterized by a serious chaotic condition such as the post-colony promises—"disarray, bewilderment, the incompatibility of means and ends, the pervasiveness of evil, the abortiveness of hope and happiness."[26] Comedy, however, carves a world of its own playful and make-believe chaos out of this serious and coercive chaos of life and nature as a liberatory necessity, in Knox's words.

There is really a lot that is significant in this conception of humour given the nonchalance or studied irreverence that had attended the study of comedy in the works of philosophers. Plato, for instance, considers the essential function of comedy as immanent in its capacity to entertain the citizens in the Republic rather than ridiculing them. In the *Republic*, comedy was properly regarded as the domain of slaves and not of worthy personalities who cannot afford such worthless emotion. Thus, Homer is outright wrong, in Plato's reckoning, to think the gods on Olympus could engage in riotous laughter.

In George Meredith, we find a serious consideration which however intellectualizes the comic spirit so much as to render it less comic. There is much in Meredith's analysis which is perceptive but contrary to Knox's insight. This is obvious from his definition of comedy as the "fountain of sound sense" whose fundamental essence consists in "teaching the world to understand what ails it."[27] The natural source for its manifestation is human folly which it aims to ridicule and correct. All this is not problematic. The problem surfaces when "comic laughter" is differentiated from ordinary laughter—the laughter of satire or irony—which carries disdain, contempt, derision and hatred. In Loewenberg's words, comic laughter "is laughter of a peculiar sort. It proceeds from the head and it is at the head that it aims. Meredith likens it to a 'harmless wine, conducing to sobriety in the degree that it enlivens'."[28] However, while this laughter is deliberate, responsible, serious, chastened, not devoid of sympathy, "…begins in insight and ends in insight," it is "*too sane and too solid an art to appeal to the average mind; it presupposes as its fundamental condition a study of the actual world which the average mind has neither the strength nor the will to endure*."[29] It is here, I contend, that Knox's view trumps Meredith's. Popular laughter is not impoverished for its extravagance, exaggeration or caricature. These are comedy's means of sublimating the chaos of political existence. This playful chaos, for Knox, *contrasts* serious reality rather than *contradict* it.

This point bears a further emphasis. In his acclaimed essay on the meaning of the comic, Bergson makes three important observations which are fundamental to the understanding of what laughter or the laughable means. Two are of import here. First, he argues that the province of laughter, strictly so called, is the *human*. While a landscape may be beautiful, sublime, ugly or just plain insignificant, it is not laughable unless there is a human dimension we have read into it that excites laughter. The same goes for an animal which exhibits for us a human feature like a hyena's "laughter". Thus, it is the human that is laughable.

The second significant derivation from this is simply that laughter must possess a social significance.[30] This implies that while laughter is limited to a group, it is equally a pervasive phenomenon that is socially unlimited. Laughter is intrinsically complicit. Our argument, however, is that within the context of the post-colony, its complicit nature has a philosophical and political implication for both the dominant and the dominated.

Let us return to Knox then. Within the philosophical framework provided by Knox, the social character of hilarity becomes obvious. As a play on the serious chaos of the real world, comedy permits "a covert communication on taboo topics…. For the very reason that humor officially does not 'count,' persons are induced to risk messages that might be unacceptable if stated seriously."[31] This then leads to a suspension of the "general guideline of the institutional setting." This is the social import of Knox's analysis of laughter as a playful transformation of serious chaos. The question however is: How playful must comedy be? How is the significance of comedy to be negotiated?

The liberatory significance of comedy, for Knox, is demonstrated by its capacity to infuse playfulness into coercive seriousness. This it does by transposing chaos into the comic. It is this transposition which Knox conceives to be liberatory. Thus, whatever else it may be, humour is, Knox argues,

> …surely a species of liberation, a lifting of horizons and a prelude to the peace and freedom which are vouchsafed by an unclouded sight and an unerring insight…it is the liberation that comes to us as we experience the singular delight of beholding chaos that is playful and make-believe in a world that is serious and coercive.[32]

This playfulness of comedy, on the contrary, is not the negation of seriousness. It creates its own not-too-serious concern in the sense that it does not disown the world it ridicules. Rather, it is continuous with this serious world. It is only playful to the extent that it contrasts—rather than contradicts—this world. Thus, rather than attenuate reality, this playful chaos enhances it. It is this capacity to achieve playful contrast that promises a gaze into the freedom of joyousness.

Does its contrastive nature make comedy conservative or radical? I contend that within the context of the Nigerian post-colony, it makes it subversive. This therefore requires that the negotiation of the laughing space between the comedians and the Nigerian public invokes a necessary conventionality which recognizes the normality of making jokes and laughing at the expense of the Nigerian state and its excesses. This comic framework, as an open, deliberate and unambiguous public condition, breaks down the playful-serious distinction in its treatment of the content of comedy.

This is because, given the condition of the Nigerian post-colony, the comedian and the audience recognizes the hilarious benefit of an issue as well as its seriousness. Indeed, it is the seriousness of the state and its coerciveness that brought them to the comedy hall in the first place. Thus, the omnipresence of the commandment demonstrates that the comedy halls are not also free from the gaze of power. Yet, the usually violent intervention of state power is held at bay in the recognition of the "irresponsibility" of comedy, or its intrinsic diffidence.

The laughter space of the post-colony, however, contrasts the postcolonial world not only to ridicule it. It does so, more significantly, in order to mirror its chaotic excesses, and undermine its regulated meaning. The essence of the laughter space therefore is the painful act of fixing socio-political meanings. The space is therefore painful in the proportion of its exaction. This is where I depart from Knox's analysis. For him, "There is at times a delight in the presence of chaos, but it is pleasant only if the chaos is playful and make-believe, *and no penalty is exacted from us*…. Our quarrel [with the serious world] was—from the beginning and throughout—'a lover's quarrel with the world'."[33] My argument is that the public created by comedy will only be able to circumvent the "commonsense" created by power only by *cognitively* contrasting the world. This requires therefore that the audience must be aware of what they are laughing at. It is this awareness that hurts them too in the process of laughing.

Let me illustrate. One fundamental characteristic of comedy and other comic forms (i.e. satire, cartoons, etc.) is that they are usually context-bound. The appropriateness of any joke, for instance, is determined by an extended context of deeply shared awareness of "what the audience already knows and thinks and values…"[34] This epistemic intimacy assumes a community of understanding which essentially gives the joke its effective delighting punch. However, a joke does more than appealing to the pre-knowledge of the audience. In Conley's assessment, all jokes are *enthymematic*: they lead inexorably from the pre-knowledge of the audience to another realm of unstated information, evidences, "theories," critiques, lamentations, assumptions and presuppositions about the context of the joke. Comedies, in other words, always jolt a painful memory.

To extend Conley's argument, comic forms, especially in the post-colony, do not succeed to the extent that they draw the audience into a community of epistemic intimacy; rather, they succeed to the extent that they reproduce in them certain unstated, and often stated, assumptions, "theories," fears, reservations, and so on about the oppression of commandment. It is this unstated cognitive understanding—rather than the superficial appreciation of the joke expressed through the volume of laughter (which often is dubious given the inventive capability of modern technology) that account for the literally critical punch of the joke, and ultimately gives it its plausibility.

The catch, however, is that the enthymematic character of the comic forms also reveal their deceptive intent. There is no doubt that jokes are what they are because they delight. Yet, to delight (Latin: *delectare*), philologically speaking, is also ironically to entice —in this case, into an unexpected outcome. The comic forms in the post-colony provide an alluring introduction into the context of the commandment through a caricature of its invented "common sense". But it goes beyond this to the stimulation of certain unstated but pervasive conceptual bundle that sums the experience of the post-colony. This is not at all problematic. What is, is the point that once the audience becomes aware of its complicity—even conviviality—with this "legitimation" of their own oppression, the joke achieves its ultimate self-reflexive function. Such comic knowledge brings about the recognition of ourselves in the contrasted chaotic world by producing in us a painful upheaval borne out of our complicity with that world. In other words, when we laugh at—rather than laugh with—the extravagance of power, we also implicitly laugh at ourselves. The painful inner upheaval we witness is the function of suddenly passing from the stable assurance of the inadequacies of state power to the growing suspicion of our deep involvement in the constitution and legitimation of the coercive institution. When we leave the auditorium, we no longer feel secure in the moral indignation of our laughter.

Yet, it is also at this point that the joke loses its own humour. This is because such awareness of complicity not only precipitate anger but equally shame: anger at the audacity of the commandment; shame at the audacity of acquiescence. Thus, the comic forms in the post-colony ultimately succeed when they fail. The critical concern, however, is to what extent the audience has gone in its complicity in the "common sense" to achieve such an unspoken interrogation.

I now turn to the analysis of another comic form—the satire—to drive home the preceding arguments. In Nigeria, one inevitably turns to the extended satirical dialogue of Reuben Abati, the Nigerian scholar and journalist. These satirical pieces are interesting, within this context, not only because they obviously parody national issues within the Nigerian post-colony, but more significantly because they involve anonymous Nigerians in series of comic negotiation of the Nigerian predicament. In other words, these dialogic satires represent, for me, the pain which is involved in laughing at the Nigerian postcolonial predicament. And in this case, these satires externalize the epistemic condition of the comedy halls: You read and laugh at the caricature of the Nigerian condition, yet you are also drawn into its seriousness and your complicity simultaneously.

Consider, for instance, “An Injured Nation.” Obviously a conversation between a lawyer and another anonymous “concerned citizen”, the piece depicts the sorry politicized state of the judiciary in Nigeria:

> “Take the Ibori case. It is over. The court says the man has no case to answer. One hundred and seventy charges....He has been discharged and acquitted!”
> “You have something against the man? The court says the evidence does not support the allegations. A court of law will not convict a man on the basis of public opinion.”
> “You know that I know and you also know that this is actually a country where anything is possible.”
> “Whatever happens we have to respect the court of law. The court of law will not convict a man simply because some people don't like his face.”
> “If you ask me, I am beginning to doubt these our courts. *And even you too*. I used to praise the judiciary but it looks like their lordships are also beginning to adjust to the times. In fact, it looks like the PDP has taken over the judiciary.”[35]

In reading the satire, you come away with the serious impression that the Nigerian judiciary, in spite of the protestation of our anonymous lawyer, is seriously “injured.” But this really is not the issue. What is, is the point that both speakers, as Nigerians, were also implicated in their arguments and interjections. For instance, the anonymous Citizen remonstrated with the lawyer thus:

> “The problem with you is that you like to talk from both sides of the mouth. One moment you blow hot. Next moment you blow cold. One day you'd say you are progressive, the next day you sound like them. And when it comes to the courts, you say you want to be careful. Look, me I don't care. Okay. Look at what happened in Ibadan in the Omisore case. That is a perfect case of a court of law going back and forth and standing on nothing. I don't know what lawyers would call what the Ibadan Court has done, but I say it is suspicious. You give a ruling nullifying an election, a new date is fixed for the election, it is postponed because there is a court injunction over a voters' register dispute and then you turn around, and claim that you made a mistake in your initial ruling, and just like that the rescheduled election is cancelled and Omisore is reinstated as Senator.”[36]

In that one statement, the Citizen not only hinted at the duplicity of the ordinary Nigerian in confronting the commandment, it also characterizes the agony of flip-flopping justice delivery within the post-colony.

In "Another Year…", Abati takes us to the heart of the matter. After discussing the woes of Nigeria at the year ending 2009 (which one of the speakers aptly described as Nigeria's "annus horibilis")—fuel scarcity, power failure, constant road accidents, brain drain, hopelessness, kidnapping, the leadership problem, political thuggery, etc.—the discussion switched to the issue of who the Man of the Year ought to be in the midst of anomie:

> "Let me ask you something. Who is your Man of the Year?"
> "Man of the Year... ? Me, now. I. Me. Myself."
> "Come on, be serious."
>
> "Man suffer no be small." [I have suffered in no small measure]
> "We are not looking for suffer-heads. I am talking about someone who made a great impact on Nigeria or the world, for good or for ill."
> "Let me see. International or local?"
> "Whichever."
> …
> "No. You make a suggestion then. Every one that I suggest, you reject."
> "Fine. You know my Man of the Year?"
> "I can't read your mind."
>
> "I will suggest the ordinary Nigerian, the man on the street, the common man, for his resilience, year in, year out."
>
> "Which man on the street? That is too vague. *Look, that your common man is his own worst enemy. He is part of the problem.* Which common man? The same common man who will not obey traffic rules and regulations, the same common man who picks pockets at bus stops, the same common man who is an internationally-acclaimed fraudster, the same common man like that salesgirl who will collect your money and refuse to give you your change?"
> "These are victims of the system."
>
> "Victims! Okay what of the four school principals in Niger State who encouraged exam malpractices in the last WAEC May/June examinations. They declared their schools Miracle Centres and asked students and parents to pay a special fee and get wonderful results. These same principals organised a group to help the students to write their papers. So, are these your common men? Are the willing parents and their wards part of your common man? And the useless principals?"
> "Not the kind of common man I have in mind."

> "The Niger State Government has ordered a demotion of the four principals, but some other common men, the colleagues of the principals, teachers, and parents are begging the government to temper justice with mercy. Your common men!"
> "Those school principals should be dismissed from service and charged to court. In fact, they should be shot. They are criminals."
> "There you are.
>
> "Or will your common man also include the Speaker of the Akwa Ibom House of Assembly who was said to have contemplated asking a juju man to help him trace a missing $15, 000 removed from an allowance of $50, 000 paid to him by the state government, which he kept in his bedroom."
>
> "Do they now pay government officials in dollars, these days? He won't qualify as a common man definitely."
>
> "If you know the number of people who will claim to be common. *We no longer need common men who are heroes of acquiescence and vague resilience in this country*; we need common men who can stand on the side of good values."
> "See how we are sweating to locate a good man in Nigeria."
>
> "Just don't come and say your wife or your Pastor or your G.O. is man of the year. That won't work."
>
> "Okay. Alright. Come on, let me buy you a drink."[36]

The key indictment is in the italicised judgment. Nobody seems to be immune from the corruptive influence in the country. This indictment, as if inconsequential, is followed immediately by an aesthetic conclusion: "Let me buy you a drink."!

Conclusion

This essay is a critical analysis of the role of laughter, or the hilarious, in the understanding of the postcolonial condition of a typical African post-colony, Nigeria. We distinguished between *laughing with* the predicament and *laughing at it*. The latter is the laughter space created by the individual at the expense of the governmental colonization of the public space at the instance of what Mbembe calls the *commandment*. However, we argued that this laughter space goes beyond the bound of mere therapeutic entertainment to escape the scourge of the *commandment*. In other words, when Nigerians enter this space, they also enter into a sense of their own culpability in creating the essentially conviviality within which the commandment and the vulgarity of power thrive in the first place. Thus, laughing at the government also entails laughing at ourselves.

Endnotes

1. Max Beerbohm, “Laughter,” *North American Review*, Vol. 214, No. 788, July, 1921, p. 40.
2. Ibid, p. 42.
3. Ibid, p. 46.
4. Achille Mbembe, *On the Post-colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 14.
5. I have adapted this idea of a dynamic approach to the intellectual history of the post-colony from Philip S. Zachernuk’s brilliant analysis in *Colonial Subjects: An African Intelligentsia and Atlantic Ideas* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginian, 2000).
6. This is a reversed hypothesis based on Zachernuk’s comment that “imperial penetration complicated rather than resolved many dynamic tensions within African societies.” Ibid, p. 7.
7. For instance, Zachernuk comments on a growing consonance, around 1948 to 1955, between the Colonial Office and the Nigerian national elites. In other to facilitate a constitutional review which will ensure the evolution of moderate nationalism while suppressing extremities, the Colonial Office put in place several constitutional changes that would obliterate “any basic difference between him [Azikiwe] and the rest of us.” A Colonial Office official, commenting on Ladipo Solanke, the central figure in the West African Students’ Union (WASU), also remarked that “in his own way he is *fighting for exactly what we want him to have*, if only we spoke the same way of reasoning.” My emphasis. See Zachernuk, *Colonial Subjects*, p. 158.
8. Philip Zachernuk, *Colonial Subjects*, p. 125.
9. Ibid, p. 157.
10. Ibid, p. 161.
11. Achille Mbembe, *On the Post-colony*, p. 15.
12. Ibid, p. 102.
13. Ibid, pp. 102-103. My emphasis.
14. Ibid, p. 103. Mbembe argues that the *commandment* is constituted by a sort of convivial relationship between the dominant and the dominated in such a way that both exist simultaneously within the same living space in mutual zombification, a relationship of “familiarity and domesticity”. The movie, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, seems to capture the essence of this zombification of the post-colony in Haiti. It depicts how the Duvalier regime was caught up in its own zombification process of its subject population.
15. Ibid, p. 108.

16. Peter Ekeh wrote about the “two publics” in Africa. It would seem that Mbembe is right to see the postcolonial predicament as generating not two but multiple publics. However, their analysis of the logics of these publics speaks insistently to the capacity of the postcolonial state power to unwittingly create publics outside the space of *commandment*, as well as the equal capacity of the postcolonial subjects to bargain with state power from the perspective of their publics. See Peter Ekeh, “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, January, 1975.
17. Achille Mbembe, *On the Post-colony*, p. 108.
18. Ibid, p. 107.
19. Ibid, p. 108.
20. Ibid.
21. Basket Mouth in *Basket Mouth Uncensored 2*, CN Media, Lagos.
22. I adapted this phrase from Walter Blair’s analysis of the characteristics of laughter in wartime America. See “Laughter in Wartime America,” *College English*, Vol. 6, No. 7, Apr., 1945, pp. 361-367.
23. Basket Mouth in *Basket Mouth Uncensored 3*, CN Media, Lagos.
24. Eboh Bomb in *AY Live*, Vol. 5, Obaino Music, Lagos.
25. Israel Knox, “Towards a Philosophy of Humor,” *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 18, August 30, 1951, p. 543.
26. Ibid, p. 542.
27. George Meredith, cited in J. Loewenberg, “The Comic Spirit,” *The North American Review*, Vol. 225, No. 842, Apr. 1928, 485.
28. Ibid, 486.
29. Ibid, p. 487. Emphasis added.
30. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, p. 6.
31. Joan P. Emerson, “Negotiating the Serious Import of Humor,” *Sociometry*, Vol. 32, No. 2, June, 1969, pp. 168-170.
32. Israel Knox, “Towards a Philosophy of Humor,” p. 541.
33. Ibid, pp. 541, 546.
34. Thomas Conley, “Argumentation: What Jokes can Tell Us about Arguments” in Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (eds.), *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 267
35. Reuben Abati, “An Injured Nation,” *The Guardian*, 18 December, 2009.
36. Ibid.
37. Reuben Abati, “Another Year…” *The Guardian*, 20 December, 2009. Emphasis added.