



Tradition and subjectivities: Warri-related comedians and their art

Tanure Ojaide & Enajite Eseoghene Ojaruega

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By some coincidence, many Nigerian stand-up comedians were born, raised, live in, or are associated with Warri and its environs. By Warri, as understood in the area, we mean Warri and its surroundings and, to a large extent, what is called the 'core Delta' of Nigeria's Delta State. The comedians include Gordons, I Go Dye, AY and Real Warri Pikin. We investigate what is possibly responsible for the natural talent of these comedians. We relate the success of these comedians to the notion of Warri as 'not coming last', the history of the city of many ethnicities, boma boys, the blues nature of suffering pain and deprivations but laughing them off, and some indigenous traditions such as the Urhobo *udje* oral poetic performance which aims to elicit laughter as a means of maintaining normalcy and preventing anybody from deviating from the communally-established norms. We use multiple concepts such as laughter as a means of regulating people's lives, satire, historicism, culture, and aesthetic considerations to study these Warri-related comedians and their art. We investigate the commonalities, subjectivities, traditions, and individual talents that have made Warri-born, raised, resident, and related comedians so successful—not only in Nigeria, but also in Africa and the world. **Keywords:** tradition, subjectivities, performance, Warri, comedians.

Introduction

Coincidentally, many successful Nigerian stand-up comedians were born or raised in Warri and its environs. In this article we intend to interrogate the sociocultural background of four highly talented comedians whose artistic performances have made them stand out with their peculiar styles despite having features that can be said to be Warri-related: Gordons, I Go Dye, AY and Real Warri Pikin. In other words, we are interested in the evidence of their Warri identity. We will combine a sociological approach and a neo-historicist concept in discussing these four stand-up comedians. We chose this mode of scholarly inquiry because the two concepts relate to how the zeitgeist of a people conditions their artistic productions. The sociocultural background and historical happenings of Warri inform the uniqueness of the stand-up comedians who use their individual experiences and observations in the Warri location as materials for artistic composition and performance.

We are aware of many scholarly works on Nigerian and African stand-up comedies. A sample of such works reveals the diversity of approach to the study of stand-up comedy. In "The Uses of Ridicule: Humour, 'Infrapolitics' and Civil Society in Nigeria" Ebenezer Obadare argues for incorporating humour into the civil society discourse. Moradewun Adejunmobi discusses the ethics of popular performance in Nigeria. In "Discourse Types in Stand-up Comedy Performances: An Example of Nigerian Stand-up Comedy" Ibikun Filani applies discourse theory to Nigerian stand-up comedy. Maik Nwosu devotes a chapter in his *The Comic Imagination in Modern African Literature and Cinema: A Poetics of Laughter* to "Nollywood Cinema and the Semiotics of Laughter". Many scholars have also discussed stand-up comedy as practiced in other African countries. David A. Donkor looks at it from the political angle in "Selling the President: Stand-up Comedy and the Politricks of Indirection in Ghana". In "Comedians, Pastors, and the Miraculous Agency of Charisma in Ghana" Jesse Weaver Shipley directs his scholarship at stand-up comedy and "charismatic preaching". Added to politics and religion, there is attention to jokes aimed at

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ethnicity as the study by Ndongye, Yieke and Onyango on Kenyan stand-up comedy titled “Ethnicity as Discursive Construct in Kenyan Televised Comedy: Humorous Harm?” shows. These studies of stand-up comedy generally relate to one nation or the African continent. But for Warri—one city, a specific location that is not a national capital like Accra or Nairobi or a national commercial centre that is a megacity like Lagos or Johannesburg—to have so much impact on stand-up comedy deserves attention.

In this article we are thus interested in the unusual phenomenon of having so many successful Nigerian stand-up comedians being related to Warri whose location, history, and sociocultural features mark them out even as their individual experiences and styles differ. These Warri-related stand-up comedians no doubt share some of the preoccupations of other Nigerian and African comedians on jokes about politics, religion, and ethnicity. However, we believe our new historicist approach will give insight into the source, nature, kind of humour, and objectives that characterise these specific comedians whose location of origin with its sociocultural and historical background give them a unique identity. We situate the stand-up comedians we are studying in Warri and its environs whose historical and socio-political necessities condition them. We also believe, like Stephen Greenblatt and Hayden White in their respective works, that the production, categorisation, and analysis of texts—here stand-up comedy—are determined by forces of history which, in turn, shape the cultural work itself. It should be noted that we are not glossing over the immediate psychological relief that the Warri comedians proffer to their audiences. Certainly, they do elicit the purgation of emotions in the stressful life of Warri as will be discussed later. However, we are emphasising the Warri identity aspects of the stand-up comedians and how they have adapted their environment into their art to give it a unique style.

Warri: History and socio-economic life

Inescapably, one must start a discussion of Warri-related comedians from the history of Warri and its acquired social manners and identity. Trade in slaves, palm products, and rubber with the Portuguese and later the British made Warri renowned as a commercial centre even before it became the headquarters of Delta Province in colonial Nigeria. Warri is also home to three major ethnic groups—Urhobo, Itsekiri, and Ijaw—who, despite a series of conflicts, continue to live together. Thus, by this multi-ethnic composition and by extension what Dibia and Odey broadly refer to as the multi-lingual nature of the South-South region of Nigeria, the city boasts of a potpourri of people, cultures, and influences. This factor might be mostly responsible for the dominance of pidgin English rather than any of the three main ethnic languages or English, as the language of informal socialisation. Oribhabor describes the Warri type of pidgin English as “an ethnically neutral language whose spread is not only infectious but serves as the ready link between and among these multifarious ethnic/tribal groups” (3). Most often, one’s proficiency in the Warri variety of pidgin English qualifies one to be called an ‘original Wafarian’, a true Warri resident. It is significant that the comedians under discussion all use the Warri variety of pidgin English to such an extent that it has become an identity marker. For example, Tiwa Savage, one of Nigeria’s most popular female musicians, describes *I Go Dye* as one of the great interpreters of the Warri pidgin accent that “cracks everyone up” (Savage). These comedians are marked by the Warri location from which their special pidgin English and Urhobo, a local language, derive. Gordons and AY occasionally infuse pidgin English with a smattering of Urhobo like in the latter’s exclamation of “*Oghene me!*” (Oh, my God!). The success of the Warri-related stand-up comedians has promoted the Warri variety of pidgin English which many now associate with the language of Nigerian comedy. It is very suitable for delivering satire and keeping its listeners entertained because it has strong descriptive powers and is prone to dramatic exaggerations, punchy jibes, double entendre, and puns.

Also contributing to Warri’s identity and social renown is the town’s evolution from the late 1960s into an ‘Oil City’ with the discovery and exploitation of crude oil in its environs. Many multinational oil companies subsequently established their headquarters there. The attendant prosperity from the oil industry brought many expatriates and other Nigerians to Warri. The oil boom brought about socio-economic disparity in the form of a widened gap between the rich and the poor. The class of economically advantaged included the expatriate staff, majority group officers from outside the area such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Ibo; and a few local workers. The overwhelming majority of locals had their means of livelihood such as fishing and farming destroyed by the exploitation of oil and gas and suffered in the new economic dispensation. Stand-up comedians tap into this inherent economic inequality as a source of humour unique to the environment. The resistance to poverty and faring economically worse than outsiders in their own town gave rise to the saying, ‘*Warri no dey carry last!*’ This determination not to remain down or ‘come last’ is testimony of the struggle and resilience that characterise Warri

folks and their effort to prosper at any cost. Later, this habit in the early 21st century will turn into the 'hustling' or 'hammer' disposition promoted by the contemporary generation of Warri boys and girls to succeed in a chosen endeavour despite apparent limitations.

Nostalgia for old Warri days

Warri residents are socially conscious; they possess a jolly spirit and have a light-hearted approach to life's vicissitudes. As they say in Warri, "After all, man pikin no go fit kill himself!" when confronted with incredible odds. This statement literally means that one cannot do the impossible to find solutions to life's challenges. An older generation of Warri residents still recall with wistful nostalgia the excitement, conviviality, and camaraderie of the social life when Warri was in vogue in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Divisive oil politics and its associated consequences led to civil strife among ethnic groups. At one point or the other in the 1990s and early 21st century, the major groups of Urhobo, Ijaw, and Itsekiri fought each other, especially over ownership of land. The yearning for the good old days of social gatherings makes the comedians mock the recent social changes which have brought conflicts among people who used to live together happily. But this is not to say that Warri people have lost the sense of communal living as they still maintain some habits nurtured by their Warri affiliations that project them as different from outsiders. They are still known for their dogged determination to fight and survive against all odds. This is what others have come to recognise as their irrepressible nature and as folks who prefer to make light of otherwise serious issues.

The Warri tradition of witty and playful banter, popularly called "yabis" or "stroking", directed at one or more persons or even at oneself, is significant not only in situating Warri-related comedians but also in establishing their common features. In Warri parlance, *yabis* is a form of verbal abuse or a barb. It could be light-hearted, harmless, or outright cruel, direct or indirect. It employs sarcasm to poke fun or takes an underhand jibe at someone or something. Sometimes, too, it could be self-derisive. That is, one can use it to laugh at one's self based on some perceived personal shortcomings or defects. Warri people are known for not allowing themselves to be outdone in a contest of words or sharp oral exchanges. In fact, the average Warri person has a witty rejoinder ready in his or her verbal arsenal and is not to be outsmarted. Often the person can effortlessly 'answer' a question with a question. The appropriation of *yabis* into the stand-up comedy performance is one of the distinguishing traits of the Warri-related comedians.

Oral poetic performance heritage

One can also note that the Warri-related comedians, especially of Ughievwen, Udu, and Uvwie clans of Urhobo from Ughelli South and Uvwie local government areas of Delta State have inherited the *udje* tradition, an oral poetic performance in which two paired groups yearly sing about their rivals. Many Udu and Ughievwen people came to Warri in the 1950s and 1960s to trade in the Main Market and other parts of the town. There is constant flow of people between Warri and Aladja, a major Udu town. Many Warri residents of Ughievwen and Udu roots often go home during their local festivals of which *udje* performance is an integral part.

By some instinctive craft the comedians of the area have imbibed many attributes of *udje* into their performance. *Udje* composers and performers use words in a special way to elicit laughter towards 'destroying' their opponents or targets of attack. The tradition, through poetic compositions, draws a profile of the person or subject to be ridiculed in such a way as to generate laughter. Through use of caricature, hyperbole, deflation, parody, and other laughter-provoking techniques, the *obo-ile* (composer) paints a devastating image of the butt of the songs. *Udje* in its poetry and performance attempts to make laughter its focal intent. The audience/spectators are the judges of *udje* performances and they carry away indelible images or gestures that provoke laughter the most. In its heyday in the Ughievwen and Udu areas, the performers of *udje* displayed an effigy of the subject of the satiric song so that, even if they used a fictitious name, the audience would know the person being referred to. As happens in performances of Warri-related stand-up comedians, the *udje* song composers and their performers share the same sociocultural milieu with their audience who follow closely those people being satirised.

Though Ojaide and Darah, in their respective *Poetry, Performance, and Art: Udje Dance Songs of the Urhobo People* and *Battles of Songs: Udje Tradition of the Urhobo*, have written on the regulating role *udje* plays in the lives of people, the oral poetic performance genre is mostly an artistic contest meant to show the poetic and verbal dexterity of the composers and performers. The artistic entertainment that *udje* provides in traditional society can be compared

to what stand-up comedy does today to entertain folks during work-free days or holiday periods. The aesthetic techniques of *udje* outlined above seem to have been absorbed as part of the strategies of the contemporary Warri-related comedians to elicit humour in performance. The sociocultural impulse that propelled the performance of *udje* seems to also inform contemporary stand-up comedy of the Warri-related comedians. Both artistic genres are fed by materials drawn from the contemporary happenings that their respective audiences are familiar with.

Warri-related comedians and their individual and collective upbringings

Though Warri boasts of raising many successful stand-up comedians, our study focuses on four representative Warri-related comedians—Gordons, I Go Dye, AY, and Real Warri Pikin. These four comedians, in their respective performances, exemplify their Warri affiliation that in their experiences make their art unique to them. Warri plays an important role in the art of the stand-up comedians related to it. The city's peculiar culture, society, history, and spatiality are converted into artistic materials that give an identity to the comedians. Invoking Warri in their performance makes Warri itself not only a place but also a character that informs the performance. As products of the Warri society, the comedians understand its worldview and aspirations and so employ multiple concepts of parody, satire, and other aesthetic considerations to elicit laughter and show the extreme nature of their daily realities. They convert the suffering, deprivation, and pain which are integral parts of the Warri experience and reality into raw humour, thereby laughing off and lightening the pain of the prevailing harsh conditions. Their experience of the social climate of their time has informed their art to be Warri-flavoured.

Each of the comedians gives a personal touch to the comedic art, thus giving it an autobiographical appeal. Often the unique talent derives from the Warri upbringing that enables the comic artist to present a highly stimulating performance. It is also significant that the comedians whose respective comic art we are studying are not only products of informal socialisation through their association with Warri but also went to school in the area. It is noteworthy that at no time did the comedians, apart from AY who studied Theatre Arts, undergo any formal training in the art of comedy; the courses they studied are not related to the comic art or entertainment industry. Yet, through a fusion of their individual talents as well as their absorption of Warri values, they are able to creatively and skilfully perform the stand-up comedy at a heightened state.

Gordons and his therapeutic comedy clinics

Godwin Komone uses the stage name Gordons. At the age of twelve he took to fishing to financially assist his poor parents. He studied Integrated Science at Delta State University, Abraka, and had his first formal public appearance as a comedian at a religious programme in Lagos in 2005. In his early days as an entertainer, he was one of the trios of a gospel music group, D. C. Envoy, in Warri. The early influences inform his fusion of music into his comic performances. His religious affiliation forms the primary background and source of materials for his brand of art. In addition to live public performances, he has also created a unique platform through a series of audio compact disc recordings tagged *Gordons' Comedy Clinic* through which he offers laughter as a cure for peoples' ailments. As at the time of this writing, he has completed over six of such 'clinics'.

Gordons has tapped into the spiritual anxieties that afflict many Nigerians. In recent years, globalisation has fuelled the exponential increase of Pentecostal churches, often incorporated, in Nigeria. Gordons situates his comic performance on this current phenomenon of religiosity. He draws materials from practices in the new churches that promise prosperity and defence against witchcraft in an era of economic and social hardship. His individual style has given him an advantage in the profession as many travellers on long journeys in taxis and buses like to listen to these audio CDs with jokes on religious themes. His resourcefulness further has a lot to do with his ability to craft jokes and anecdotes from aspects of his personal life and public experiences as well as some jokes about Christian practices and values in the country. In an interview in 2015, he said: "I have the gift of comedy and it is comely to me" (Gordons, "I am still a Doctor of Comedy"). This statement shows his self-awareness of the specific type of stand-up comedy that he practices.

In spite of the much-touted appellation of being an 'Oil City', Warri has some of the poorest neighbourhoods and slums not only in Delta State but also in Nigeria. Areas such as Iyara, Pessu, McIver, and Sido could pass for ghettos or urban slums. Buildings constructed with planks and corrugated iron sheets, located in unhygienic surroundings lacking essential amenities might have been 'homes' to the likes of Gordons as a young child. However, Gordons does not shy away from the fact that he is a product of such a poor environment as revealed in some jokes he creates from his growing-up experiences in such neighbourhoods. He constructs these jokes around abject

poverty and strict parental upbringing. The preoccupation with the pain of his early life is a strategy to provide his audiences with details of his life's trajectory as well as showcase, through his personal experience, the resilient and irrepressible character of the Warri person in the face of difficult life encounters. He not only laughs at himself and invites others to do so with him as he shares these experiences but also hopes to inspire his listeners with his rags-to-riches story. Gordons' "Psycho-comedy" is a brand of comedy that not only provokes hearty laughter but also enjoins the listener to think deeply and learn from it. He laughs at suffering but gives his audience hope of overcoming the difficulties they might be facing in their lives as he has successfully done. He becomes a role model for the suffering folks in Nigerian society who someday will laugh, as he now does, over the past pain.

He depicts, in one of his jokes, the sordid state of poverty he lived in as a child by describing the endless pangs of hunger he and his siblings experienced. According to him, food was so scarce for his family that even the rats that lived in the house and depended on crumbs or leftovers for their own survival came out one day carrying placards in protest against the 'stinginess' of these human inhabitants! Another joke dwells on the inconveniences, on both parents and children, of a family living together in a one-bedroom apartment, as is the case in shanty homes. Even when the children are asked to go to sleep long before their bedtime, the parents are frustrated from enjoying private sexual relations because of a restive child (in this case, him) who is unable to sleep or curious to know what the parents are up to and therefore interrupts them at a crucial moment. Of course, he receives some strokes of the cane from his father for such unwelcome interference and learns how to mind his business around 'adult business' next time.

Gordons also recounts an anecdote in which, in the company of his mother, he witnessed a young boy talk rudely back at his parents. After watching this exchange, his own mother turns to him and without him committing any offence or similar provocation, begins to knock him on the head to warn him against any attempt to "try that nonsense" with her. The mother's action bewilders the poor child as he has not done anything wrong. However, since he knows the no-nonsense nature of his mother, he would not even dream of doing what the other boy just got away with ("Gordons Comedy Clinic Ward 6").

The comedian often appropriates and parodies some negative or unsavoury Christian practices by church leaders and members of their congregations. Through comic parallels, he draws attention to similarities in practices between his entertainment profession and the church; hence his constant reference to both as "ministries". One of the titles he has given himself is "the Bishop of the Osusu Ministry". "Osusu" literally means "collection". He employs the term to subtly condemn the frequent financial demands in churches under the guise of collecting offerings for the Lord. He creatively deploys formulaic expressions in the church preaching tradition during his performances to reinforce the parallel between the comic industry and the church. Examples are his intermittent use of the exclamations "Jah, Jehovah, Eloil" and interjections of "Allelu!" to which his audience will sometimes chorus "Alleluyah!" as is common during church services. He thus reflects Warri's social reality by appropriating the localisation of Pentecostalism to entertain his audiences.

Consciously or unconsciously, Gordons draws from the *udje* oral poetic performance tradition when he uses his art as a humourist to condemn in a satiric manner some unsavoury fads in today's churches. *Udje* has much to do with creating humour out of human follies to serve as deterrence. An instance of this *udje* quality in Gordons' comedy is where leaders of churches assume undue authority or exercise rigid control over members of their congregations. In the name of "deliverance", the act of setting an adherent free from challenges through prayers and other related actions, they often go overboard in their actions. Taking a cue from true life incidents, he calls out some pastors and their churches known for such practices by humorously referring to these acts by the type of discipline in question. Thus, he tags as "fire deliverance" Reverend King who lit up a female member accused of committing fornication, "karate deliverance" for T. B. Joshua because of the aggressive sounds he makes in his deliverance as if fighting martial arts, and "flogging deliverance" as adopted by white garment-wearing churches ("Gordons Comedy").

By making comedy out of what is usually regarded as sacred or off limits, Gordons implements Henri Bergson's theory of the use of humour as a mechanism for bringing the deviant and eccentric back into line by mocking their peculiarities (qtd in Olaseni 5). These jokes are meant to expose the leaders and make them abandon their outlandish religious styles and their fleecing of members through too many collections.

Gordons intersperses his pidgin English with exclamations in Urhobo like "oghwokoghwoko!" which often creates a certain mystique in his performance. "Oghwokoghwoko" is an Urhobo onomatopoeic expression to designate ebullience, weight, and richness of the subject (person or issue). His focus on the church results from the spread of

Pentecostalism as a result of globalisation. One can thus say that Gordons has local and global influences driving his comic performances. He taps into his Urhobo heritage, the socioeconomic reality of the Warri area, and the general discontent with the brand of Pentecostalism that focuses on economic anxieties. Often, when he criticises the churches or a practice in his Comedy Clinics, cries of “Yees!” are heard or people are seen nodding their heads in addition to the wild bursts of laughter.

I Go Dye and his yabis convention

I Go Dye (Francis Agoda) is another Warri-related humourist who has established a strong voice and brand name in the stand-up comedy tradition in Nigeria. He has explained his stage name as a direct coinage from a mispronunciation of his surname, Agoda (a-go-da / I go dye). The stage name also reflects the unbridled style of comedy he practises. In other words, he realises that the topical issues he addresses through his art are likely to put his life in danger or generate controversy. When performing at Rhythm Unplugged in 2013, I Go Dye underscored the function of the comedian as a social critic and not just an entertainer when he repeatedly proclaimed as he performed on stage “My brother, you talk, you die! If you no talk, you die! So, let’s talk and die!”

He is perhaps the Warri-related comedian that most openly displays in his performances his affiliations with Warri. Indeed, his descriptive power sets him apart from the other stand-up comedians. At the onset of his career, he had the penchant for flaunting physical and mental features that clearly reflected his Warri upbringing: a hungry-looking frame, sharp wit, and quick comebacks or rebounds. He says he draws his inspiration from “the unique people of Warri” and reaffirms our earlier portrait of the Warri resident by saying that “if you are from Warri, the spirit of comedy flows in your veins” (“Me and My Top7 Comedians—I Go Dye”)

I Go Dye has imaginatively adopted the Warri *yabis* verbal style to spice up his art of comedy. His individual comic performance art is steeped in the Warri *yabis* tradition. In most cases he performs extemporaneously by taking on subjects and themes from his audience’s reactions and feedback and effortlessly crafts fresh jokes from them. He does not hurry over his pre-arranged delivery at a live performance. Rather, he accommodates interjections from members of the audience to which he provides sharp and rib-cracking retorts. With this technique, he creates a wonderful rapport with his audience whom he allows to participate actively in the performance and, in so doing, enhances the participatory pleasure derived from his performances on stage. On this style, the comedian makes the following remarks:

So I have developed a spontaneous approach that allows a steady flow of issues and a simple disposition that creates that realization of our collective responses on ethnic, religious, civil and professional levels. So, that keeps the audience to easily get in touch with the issues surrounding the jokes. (Onikoyi)

He thus seeks the “collective responses” of his audience to better enjoy his jokes irrespective of the subject of his performance.

The comedian’s self-*yabis*, the practice of making himself the butt of his jokes, gives great delight to his audiences. This is his way of pre-empting others who might want to take a jab at him by picking on some of his shortcomings. Commenting on his lean frame, he often regales his listeners with anecdotes from his underprivileged childhood days. Generally, in many of such jokes, he employs parallels to portray the class distinction between the rich kid and his poor self. He describes a child from a wealthy background who enjoys all the perks of comfortable living and modern exposure but is not street smart as an “*Ajebutter*” or “*Ajebo*”. On the other hand, there is the “*Atutupoyo*” or “*Ajepako*” child who comes from a poor background and whose rugged visage bears the marks of impoverishment and a rough life. He unabashedly identifies himself as belonging to this second category as he says he was born with a “plastic spoon” as opposed to those born with a silver spoon in their mouth. He projects the poor group as ingenious and resilient as they often convert their underprivileged circumstances and street knowledge to their advantage later in life. Ironically, much as he laughs at the truancy of those brought up in poor homes, he shows admiration for folks who have “common sense” or are fast-thinking. This attitude is reflective of Warri residents who are sometimes referred to as “sharp guys” with mixed feelings of admiration and trepidation.

I Go Dye practices the performance tradition of many other Nigerian stand-up comedians who operate a fluid, interactive, and decentred performance stage even as he projects his Warri identity. As already mentioned, Gordons interacts with his audience by repeating “*Allelu!*” to which the audience responds “*Alleluya!*” I Go Dye constantly uses the expression “*Areal!*” as his entry or opening line at every performance (see “I Go Dye Killing London with Laugh”). This interactive opening has its functions in his performance. It acts as a rhetorical device

foregrounding his identity as a 'proper Warri boy' as this seems to be the form of popular greeting amongst people in closely-knit social circles in Warri. The dramatic opening also establishes a rapport between the comedian and his audiences, who, by responding to his familiar greeting, will share mutual connections with their Warri association.

He has intentionally or inadvertently borrowed the *ite*, or masking aspect of *udje* oral poetic performance. In his *yabis* or self-ridicule, he takes a cue from great *udje* singer-performers such as Okitiakpe of Ekakpamre, Memerume of Edjophe, Oloya of Iwhrekan, and Vphovphen of Okwagbe. For instance, Memerume sings about his not having a child despite his many wives in a memorable song in which the "childless one" cuddles his child only in dreams. Similarly, Vphovphen, after losing a brother, sings about himself before rivals accuse him of witchcraft (see Ojaide, *Poetry, Performance and Art*). By first criticising themselves, the *ite* artists of *udje* and I Go Dye pre-empt their being subjected to derision and steal the thunder from the abuse of others. Self-mockery gives the stand-up comedian the licence to go after others' shortcomings without fear as he has already exposed his 'skeletons' before them. He has a pseudo-serious pattern of constructing his jokes as he takes up pressing national issues and relates them to everyday life even as he analyses them on stage in a humorous manner. Beginning his performances with "Areal!" is also akin to the opening formula or salutation in *udje* performances. Since *udje* is an oral poetic performance genre, the performer needs a marker to designate the beginning of each of the structural parts of opening, middle, and end of a song. Similarly, I Go Dye uses "Areal!" to start a new segment of his performance. As the formula has a mnemonic impact on the *obo-ile* (cantor), so does "Areal!" on I Go Dye.

I Go Dye's comedy entertains as well as fights against social ills and vices. He skilfully uses suspense and surprise endings to enhance the delivery of his jokes. In one instance, he comically exposes the braggart nature of the Warri boy who boastfully claims he is not afraid of any adversaries but takes to his heels at the slightest whiff of a direct confrontation.

AY, the resourceful 'Warri boy'

One of the most accomplished Nigerian stand-up comedians in the industry today is Ayo Richard Makun, popularly known as AY. Though his parents are from Ondo State, he was born and brought up in Warri where he also received his primary and secondary school education. He was quite involved in the world of show business during his undergraduate days in the Theatre Arts Department at Delta State University, Abraka where he graduated in 2003. He received an award for being the first student to direct a convocation production in the annals of his department. AY was once the personal assistant and event manager to Ali Baba, popularly known as the father of Nigerian stand-up comedy. He thus had the opportunity to learn from one of the veterans of Nigeria's stand-up comedy business. Even though he is famous for his stand-up comedy, AY is multi-talented as he writes, directs, acts, and is engaged in other forms of activities related to show business. In all of this, "*I be proper Warri boy!*" is his favourite way of identifying himself and his affiliation with Warri.

AY started out in comedy by simulating on stage some popular mannerisms of some church leaders, especially their penchant for using highfalutin language. Thus, a key feature of his stand-up comedy is parody which he directs at the antics of known personalities in society. Commenting on this type of mimicry, Filani says:

By mocking whoever the target is, the comics assert their role as contemporary anthropologists by denaturalising the acts or actors being mimicked; they appropriate whatever they mimic within the frame of a collective cultural system, to which the stand-up comedians and their audience belong [...] Their [audience's] laughter is synonymous with corrective criticism which demands that the targets should realign themselves within the right social frame. Mimicry in stand-up performance is an ironic cultural practice that resists and subverts the actions and actors that have been previously accepted or revered. ("The Use of Mimicry in Nigerian Stand-up Comedy" 91)

In order to enhance the delivery of his jokes and spice up his art, AY skilfully blends his professional training as a dramatist with that of a comedian by inserting short drama skits into his stage acts. Although they are hilarious, they also examine pertinent aspects of human and social relationships. The comedian operates on the premise that there is a mutual understanding between him and his audience of the underlying assumptions behind the characters and acts being mimicked or performed on stage as jokes. AY appropriates a shared knowledge with his audience and this becomes the individual talent that specifically marks his comedy. A frequent persona he adopts during his acts is that of a white garment-wearing prophet who engages in prophecies, as is the practice in some Christian religious sects in Nigeria. He takes on role-playing and is referred to as Prophet AY in such instances. In

keeping with the humour expected of comedians, his performances are mock prophecies that are subtle jibes at some perceived human foibles such as greed, corruption, and covetousness.

His opening performance at his *AY Live in Asaba* show affords us a classic example of his art. Garbed in his white garment with a bell in tow and feigning body movements and exclamations as if in a state of spiritual possession, AY moves among his audience and picks at recognised faces one after the other ‘prophesying’ for them. Considering his audience is usually made up of many celebrities and notable public figures, it is interesting to watch him reduce them to helpless laughter even as he reveals pseudo-serious truths about them. He begins his prophetic utterances with the phrase “The Lord says I should tell you [...]” thereby giving the impression of a divine command that should not be contested but accepted as true. He accuses the governor (then, Emmanuel Uduaghan) who has a daughter of not wanting him to be his son-in-law and therefore preventing him from ‘hammering’. In Warri and other parts of Nigeria, the term ‘hammer’ refers to acquiring immense wealth without necessarily working hard or honestly for it. Here, marrying the governor’s daughter implies marrying into wealth with all its attendant economic and social advantages. So, when AY cracks that joke, he is working with the assumption that his audience is conversant with the social disposition of hammering, seeking wealth in an amoral way by any means necessary. This concept of getting rich by exploiting any opportunity that affords it is embraced by many Warri and other Nigerian youths.

In another example, he tells a lady in the audience that the Lord says “I should tell you to let it go! Yes, that wig which you have had on your head for nine months now, for it is not pregnancy!” Evidently, this is a jab meant to mock ladies who are fond of wearing a particular hair add-on or style for long periods of time without thinking of the unhygienic consequences. Of note is the fact that when he delivers these prophecies in the form of a religious dictate, he expects his target to give his ‘revelation’ a second thought like one would do an utterance coming from a seer in the church.

AY’s mini skits during live stage performances are humorous versions or interpretations of prevalent sociocultural issues. They bear testimony to his ingenious creativity and resourceful crafting of jokes out of current issues. Enlisting the assistance of some of his fellow comedians, he takes his audience through rib-cracking re-enactment of some controversial events and human relationships. “Na So We See Am” is the title of a stage play presented during his *AY Live Concert 2016 Lagos Invasion*. Through the verbal bickering between two sets of couples—Falz the Bahd Guy and Chigurl and AY and Princess, who are also comedians—the audience gets an insight into a series of controversial and contemporary issues. Notable celebrities or public figures embroiled in one scandal or another come under attack for their anti-social behaviours. Though the performers do not directly mention the names of their targets, they leave no-one in doubt as to the butts of their jokes (AY, “Na So We See Am”). They achieve this effect through the employment in their performance of mimicry, parody, double entendre, puns, satire, allusions, hyperbole, and ridicule. Coincidentally, AY shares the same techniques that *udje* composers deploy in their songs. AY incorporates into his comic performances mutually-shared knowledge and experience between the comedian and the audience. This art thoroughly thrills the audience as folks easily follow the act because they possess background knowledge of the issues being humorously re-enacted.

The artiste’s contribution to the stand-up comedy tradition goes beyond his performances on stage. He is involved in mentoring younger Nigerians in stand-up comedy workshops. There is his AY Open Mic Challenge, a competition which seeks out new talents in the comedy industry and offers them an opportunity to project and develop their potential. He has established a solid reputation of featuring an impressive number of fellow comedians—established and budding ones—on his shows. This is clear evidence of the Warri convivial disposition that he possesses and puts into practice. Recently he has veered into acting, starring in films such as *90 Days in Atlanta* (2014), which by its box office ticket earnings clinched a place in the Guinness Book of World Records; *A Trip to Jamaica* (2016); and *Merry Men I and II* (2018 and 2020). In the first two movies, he proudly retains this identity of a Warri boy where he plays the role of adventurous Akpos, a fictional, stereotypical, young and irascible, but harmless, Warri rebel.

Real Warri Pikin and her unabashedly Warri heritage

Although only just recently having gained visibility in the world of Nigerian stand-up comedy, Anita Afoke Alaire Asuoha deserves inclusion among Warri-related stand-up comedians by virtue of her ingenious appropriation of Warri-related speech idioms, mannerisms, and other concepts in her artistic productions. Born and raised in Warri by an Ijaw father and Urhobo mother, she typifies a *bona fide* Warri citizen as she is a product of two of the

three prominent ethnic groups that dominate Warri. Her adopted stage name, “Real Warri Pikin”, underscores her awareness and sense of rootedness in her heritage as it signifies a proud and unabashed declaration of her authentic style (“real”) of comedy undergirded by her Warri identity and affinity. She is currently arguably the most popular female comedian from Warri because of her brand of comedy which embodies the language and other mannerisms of her environmental upbringing and influence. In its originality, her comedy continues to appeal to a wide audience as well as increase her fast-growing fan base. While she has not organised a full-fledged personal live performance of her own (her plan towards this, slated for June 2020, was scuttled by the exigencies of the Coronavirus pandemic), she has nevertheless featured as a guest artiste on shows by renowned Nigerian comedians at home and abroad.

A graduate of Political Science and Public Administration from the Benson Idahosa University in Benin City, Real Warri Pikin admits that comedy has always been a part of her, even as she pursued other career choices. However, she inadvertently took up comedy as a profession after her failed suicide attempt when she made and posted a short motivational video about overcoming depression on social media. In several interviews, she talked about how a bad business decision plunged her and her husband into huge debt that ruined their fortunes overnight and made her fall into depression which led her to attempt to take her life as her way out of the problem. Having survived that near-death experience, she decided to reinvent herself by converting that Warri die-hard, hustling spirit of never giving up into art to encourage women, especially, to cope with marital and other social challenges by making funny and uplifting videos.

Real Warri Pikin’s response to those critics who feel that she should concentrate more on taking care of her family and leave the public domain of comedy because she is a woman, is that “anybody can be funny, regardless of gender” (Real Warri Pikin, “Depression Pushed me into Comedy—Anita Asuoha (Real Warri Pikin)”). With a heavily-endowed figure, she adopts the *udje* and Warri *yabis* techniques of self-criticism by personally making jokes about this. She joins the audience in laughing at herself when she tells them that one would need a ladder to climb her waist because of its size! In many ways, her person, subject, and style situate Warri subjectivities from a women’s perspective within a profession generally regarded by male chauvinists as the exclusive preserve of men. Watching her performances, whether during stage shows or as short video clips, one cannot help but admire her seamless delivery aided by her boisterous and ebullient nature as well as the mellifluous, almost song-like quality of her Warri pidgin. Listening to her is a thrill as she effortlessly delivers on the famous Warri brand of pidgin English heavily laced with expressions unique to the area’s local languages (Urhobo and Ijaw), which are now popularly recognised and used beyond the Warri environs. She also lithely intersperses this pidgin with some short terms or expressions in Urhobo that often enhance her delivery and provoke more laughter. What is exceptional about this latter style is her predilection for adopting euphemistic versions or slang of otherwise uncensored or sensitive words in Urhobo. For example, she refers to the act of lovemaking as “*oblorblor*” or “*lalar*”. Even for a non-native speaker of Urhobo, her facial expression and the inflection in her voice as she says this gives one an idea of what she means. Her coinage of these onomatopoeic terms thus makes what should have otherwise been too graphic or vulgar funny. She also delivers her pieces of advice in pidgin as figurative wisecracks as when she tells women “*not to carry men matter for head like gala*”. “*Gala*” is a popular snack in Nigeria sold by hawkers who pursue car drivers in traffic holdups to make quick sales. Real Warri Pikin thus says that women should not preoccupy themselves with men’s issues to their own detriment.

In another counselling piece, she asks women to come to terms with the fact that a “*man’s phone is like onions; once you open am, you go begin cry*”. Onion is used here as a metaphor for the hurtful discoveries that the contents of the phone could reveal. In admonishing a proud person, she questions why he or she “*dey like to dey spread like virus?*”, thus deflating the subject’s assumed ego by associating it with a destructive disease. She has a flair for including single words or abbreviations that allow her to say much with little, hence when she tells people to “*use their HQ* (headquarters to mean brain) *as life na PH* (per head to mean strictly personal)”, she means they should learn to be discerning by applying wisdom in tackling personal challenges as there is no blanket solution to solving human problems.

As is typical of the style of the male comedians already discussed, Real Warri Pikin also has a signature opening call and response formula which she employs in initiating a special connection with her audience or listeners. Her cry of “*Area! Wetin dey play?*” to which the audience responds “*Nothing dey play*” usually sets the pace for the congenial mood or back and forth banter she skilfully sustains throughout her performance. However, social media, especially on Instagram, is where Real Warri Pikin has succeeded in making the most impact with her brand of

comedy. She has, to her credit, quite an impressive amount of video clips, each of about one minute maximum, through which she delivers salient home truths on a variety of issues on human relationships and lived realities (Real Warri Pikin, “Best of Real Warri Pikin: Funny & Motivational”). In some of these clips, she appropriates the role of the comedian as dramatist. She acts as a female traditional herbalist who uses a laptop, as against the traditional cowries, for divination, implying that this traditional practice has also been affected by globalisation. Many of her videos are inspirational even as she infuses a lot of witticism and other local flavour from her Warri background into addressing serious subject-matter.

Shared Warri commonalities of Nigeria’s stand-up comedians

A shared experience of Warri and its environs and specific individual subjectivities thus inform the stand-up comedy genre as practiced by Warri-related performers in Nigeria. The Warri experience involves historical, socio-economic, cultural, and other factors that commingle to define the realities of the lives of the people. What has emerged from our discussion of the four representative stand-up comedians from the area is that there is a peculiar, or rather distinctive, Warri-ness in their language, gestures, response to reality, and total concept and practice of stand-up comedy that makes them unique in Nigeria. Most Nigerian comedians may be interested in the history of their specific hometowns. However, the Warri-related performers set themselves apart in the manner they utilise Warri’s history as a city of sailors, *boma* boys, multiplicity of ethnic groups, and a certain proclivity for flamboyance and grand gestures despite often harrowing times. Historical happenings and societal norms possibly condition every comedian in one way or another. There is no doubt that Warri’s unique history of growth from a sailor city through the oil boom days, and inter-ethnic strife to contemporary civil politics and changing social lifestyle feed the comedians with an abundance of material for their jokes.

Humour, jokes, and the concept of laughter among a people evolve. In Nigeria jokes are more pointed in periods of democracy, unlike in military dictatorship when jokes tend to be more subtle against the rulers. Nigeria’s Third Republic has given stand-up comedians ample freedom to cast jokes at issues, personalities, and events. Warri-related comedians are reaping the dividends of democracy in their performances in which nothing is off bounds. The four comedians discussed were once at the margin economically but managed to struggle out of poverty by making a career out of comedy. They now make self-deprecating jokes of their previous abject position. They have successfully utilised Warri smartness to get out of their poor state through their use of their Warri characteristics and Warri slang, pidgin English, *yabis*, and gestures.

Gordons, I Go Dye, AY, and Real Warri Pikin share technical aspects of other Nigerian stand-up comedians that tap from the larger Nigerian history. However, in their use of interactive strategies, each has a unique trademark to enliven their audiences. While we have compared this strategy to what obtains in the oral poetic performance of *udje*, the contemporary stand-up comedians are fluid as they respond to their individual audience’s reactions, quite unlike *udje* that has a text which the performer adheres to.

The comedians use their individual experiences of hardship in Warri to entertain. Together with poverty, there is a ludicrous quality to their lives which these comedians tap from in their performances. Many of the stand-up comedians were born or raised during the austere Structural Adjustment Period in Nigerian history when Nigerians learnt to manage scarce resources. Parody is a major technique used by the comedians who experienced it from the socio-economic realities of the time and their own culture. In Urhobo culture, there is the tendency to make do in a sarcastic way with very scarce resources. If a ritual is to be performed with a goat and the person is too poor to buy a goat, the person substitutes the head or any part of the goat for that ritual. The saying among Warri fishermen that it is better to catch a carp than catch nothing also shows this philosophy of life which the comedians express in their performances. The *howfardo* philosophy has to do with accepting the reality of very little rather than the much that is unattainable.

As already discussed, globalisation has energised Pentecostalism which has spread like wildfire at a critical period in Nigerian history. People have become generally more religious and are susceptible to the preaching of many of the evangelists who promise them prosperity and defence against witchcraft and other evils. However, many pastors have turned their ministries into businesses to make money. Furthermore, many pastors do not only promise their congregation impossibilities but themselves commit indiscretions which the comedians pick on in their performances.

Conclusion

Nigeria's stand-up comedy is relatively young and continues to evolve. It is informed by socio-political and economic happenings in the country that both the performers and their audiences are familiar with. In the midst of multifarious national and social experiences, comedians with Warri-related experiences have not only continued to blaze the trail in the development of the genre but have also established a distinctive voice and performance art that set them apart. Their uniqueness arises from a confluence of factors that include Warri's history, the sociocultural background of its inhabitants, pidgin English and its associated banter, and, above all, the peculiar poverty or other personal experiences the comedians endured growing up in a supposedly oil-rich city. In the subgenre of Nigerian stand-up comedy, harsh local realities, relentless global onslaught and influences, and individual talents converge to form a vibrant, witty, slapdash humour in their words and gestures that not only make the comedians relive their past to better appreciate their present but also succeed in giving their audiences relief by laughing off their contemporary problems as Warri 'boys' or 'girls'.

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