

ORALITY AND HEALING IN THE STAND-UP COMEDY PERFORMANCE OF SELECTED NIGER DELTA COMEDIANS

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Abstract

Stand-up comedy is a sub-genre of oral literature or orality. It involves a comedian standing in front of an audience to crack jokes and tell funny stories in order to make people laugh. It is also a therapeutic tool used to heal wounds through humour and comedy and this eventually leads to mental balance, happiness, peace and tranquility among the people. In line with the above, this paper attempts to explicate the various ways selected Niger Delta stand-up comedians have achieved this therapeutic or healing function among the people of that region. It also studies the psychological effects this brand of comedy has on the audience especially Niger Deltans of Nigeria. The selected stand-up comedians used in this study include I Go Dye, Gordons and Liki Liki Mouth. It is discovered that in relation to the basic functions of the arts generally, and literature in particular, the selected Niger Delta stand-up comedians have, in no small measure, contributed their quota in bringing peace, harmony and a stable mental health to the people of the region.

Key Words: *Orality, Stand-up Comedy, Niger-Delta, Healing, Performance.*

Introduction

Literature is categorised into written and oral forms. The oral form is referred to as Oral Literature or Orality. It has been an integral part of the culture, the traditions and the various institutions of human development in Africa. In written literature, the writer is

engaged in his or her creation through the written word. This is not so in orality because unlike the writer, the oral performer's engagement in his or her creative process, is by manipulation of language through the spoken word. The concept or meaning of oral literature (orality) is necessary in order to, right from the outset, lay a foundation for which this essay is built.

Orality has been variously described as a work of art that is orally composed, orally transmitted and orally realised. The implication of the above is that orality is completely spoken and has nothing to do with the written form. One of its basic features is performance through the oral artist. Ruth Finnegan explains that "oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a specific occasion; there is no other way in which it can be realised as a literary product" (2). The implication of Finnegan's statement is that performance is sacrosanct with orality. F. B. O. Akporobaro agrees with Finnegan when he concludes that, "an oral literary expression exists as a performance, as a speech act accentuated and rendered alive by various gestures, social conventions and the unique occasion in which it is performed" (2)

From the various views of the scholars revealed above, it is clear that oral literature (orality) is "literature delivered by words of mouth". In other words, it is a product of the creative use of the imagination by the performer (the oral artist, storyteller, bard, raconteur, comedian, etc.) who speaks, recites, chants and sings on "specific occasions". One of such oral artists is the stand-up comedian who performs on "specific occasions". The occasions include marriage ceremonies, naming ceremonies, birthday parties, etc. These take place in bars, clubs, hotels, pubs, nightclubs, colleges, theatres, concert halls, etc. Wikipedia defines "stand-up comedy" as a "comedic style in which a comedian performs in front of a live audience, speaking directly to them through a microphone". It is referred to as a stand-up comedy because the performer, in most cases, stands up while performing. This means

that when the performer sits down while performing, he or she can be referred to as a “sit-down comedian”. The stand-up comedian tells humorous stories and cracks jokes to make people or his or her audience laugh. In order to enhance his or her performance, he or she may use props, music or magic tricks.

Apart from performing live to an audience, stand-up comedy has been distributed commercially via television, radio, internet, DVD and CD. Biodun Jeyifo, in his discussion on the impact of Nollywood in Africa, observes that Nollywood, of which stand-up comedy is a branch, has captured the domestic market in Nigeria and Africa. He says that Nollywood (stand-up comedy inclusive), “now dominates broadcast time and space on Africa Magic, the MNET Channel based in South Africa and which is the dominant emporium on television for the whole continent” (591).

Orality, Stand-Up Comedy and their Healing Functions

Orality performs many functions in society. Some of these functions include entertainment, education, instruction and creating beauty. In the same vein, stand-up comedy which involves the use of body movements and verbalisation by the stand-up comedians, plays the above roles of entertaining, educating, instructing and creating beauty. It also mirrors the society, provides pleasure, inculcates values, imparts knowledge and informs us about the world around us. Apart from the above functions, orality in general and stand-up comedy in particular plays another very important role: healing of “wounds”. This important therapeutic function of stand-up comedy is what we intend to focus on in this essay. Since the beginning of stand-up comedy in Europe, it has performed a major role of healing. Healing here goes beyond mental and physical illness. It encompasses all aspects of life where there is sanity, peace and unity among people. In Africa, stand-up comedy is vibrant and thriving even though it is a late entrant in the entertainment industry. Nonetheless, it has contributed immensely to promoting peace and tranquility in Africa.

In Africa, and especially Nigeria, there have been violent clashes, ritual killings, conflicts (political, religious and ethnic) and all forms of disturbing scenarios. Examples are Ife/Modakeke; Tiv/Junkun; Apomu/Ikoyi; Umuebu/Obiaruku ethnic clashes that have taken place in recent years. Others are Aguleri/Umuleri, Sagamu, Jos and Zango Kataf. Churches and mosques are being burnt; there are kidnappings, banditry and protests. An example is the recent ENDSARS protests in Nigeria and a host of others.

Many stand-up comedians have organised different programmes to bring the people together in their jokes and hilarious stories in order to buttress the importance of living in harmony through religious tolerance, intertribal marriages and the need to educate the people to desist from such. This is a step in the right direction because it has led to the healing of the wounds of the aggrieved and relieving them of stress and depression. This is why Avner Ziv says that “comedy and satire possess a common denominator in that both try to change or reform society by means of humour”. Recognising this therapeutic role of stand-up comedy, an online material retrieved at www.chortle.co.uk observes that, “laughter saves relationships, diffuses tension and keeps mental health in check”. Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu emphasise the healing role of orality and stand-up comedy when they say that the audience is “transported to a level of ecstasy that completely drowns individual fears, sorrows and aspirators”. They summarise this by looking at the healing role of the arts generally. In their submission, they maintain that;

Arts can therefore be said to contribute significantly to the maintenance of a psychological balance in individuals, thus bringing about some medicinal advantages. Arts reduces tension accumulated in the process of sorting out professional, domestic, religious, cultural

and socioeconomic callings and prepares the human mind for greater exploits by granting it a tranquilising and refreshing rest.(20)

The implication of the above is that stand-up comedy has positive mental and physical benefits. Scott Weems reiterates this truth when he says that “humour is a form of psychological processing, a coping mechanism that helps people to deal with complex and contradicting messages, a response to conflict and confusion in our brain”.

Since the beginning of 2020, the whole world has been paralysed by the Covid-19 pandemic due to the rampaging and devastating spread of the Coronavirus which has led to countries locking down their economies and people are made to stay at home. It has dealt a deadly blow on humans as it continues to take people’s lives. As at January 2021, it had taken more than two million lives worldwide, majority of the deaths coming from Europe and America. Despite this horrid and horrifying state of humans, humour still plays a major therapeutic role in keeping people healthy. In her tweet on May 4, 2020, Vivian Manning-Schaffel reveals how comedy made her happy during the lockdown. According to her,

If we don’t laugh, we’ll cry”, is a phrase that often rings true but for me, it resonates most powerfully right now. I live two blocks from a hospital in Brooklyn. I have been in quarantine with my family since March 13, and the sound of wailing sirens haunt me 24/7. The U.S. now has more than 1,000,000 reported cases of coronavirus and upwards of 15,000 people have perished in New York City alone. That said, if I so much hear

‘coronavirus’ at bedtime, a good night’s sleep gets replaced with a lengthy late-night nap, as I’ll lay awake processing the scope of this massive tragedy into the wee hours. That’s why in order to get some sleep and preserve what’s left of my mental health, I’ve decided to ban any form of entertainment but comedy past eight o’clock at night. And apparently, I’m not alone. (Par. 1)

The above is a clear indication that comedy can be used as a therapeutic tool. Through comedy, Vivian was able to maintain a mental balance. As observed earlier, the healing function of stand-up comedy goes beyond maintaining good mental and physical health. People’s sad emotions are made to look ordinary and ridiculous. Many people have been devastated by loneliness and boredom. A man who has lost his entire family during an accident or an outbreak of diseases can resort to comedy for entertainment thereby healing him of hypertension and heart related diseases like cardiac arrest which has killed many people. He listens to comedy and jokes to “diffuse tension and keep mental health in check”.

In the world today, poverty has dealt a deadly blow on the people, especially in Africa, “the poorest continent in the world”. The average African makes \$1,000 per annum while the worldwide average is over \$6,500. Poverty is largely as a result of unemployment. Families cannot feed three times daily. In Nigeria, for example, many people have died because of unemployment and poverty. Graduates find it difficult to get jobs. Those who are lucky to be employed are losing their jobs as a result of the economic effects of inflation, recession, the impact of Covid-19 and others. While this has continued to have a toll on the lives of Africans, especially Nigerians, corruption persists. The massive corruption in the country has led to under-development. The country is seemingly

becoming the personal estate of the corrupt government officials who embezzle and siphon money intended for the development of the country.

Sequel to the above, stand-up comedy has had and continues to have its healing function on the nation's economy, thereby healing the wounds of the people. One way this has been done is by providing job opportunities and creating wealth for the stand-up comedians and the budding and talented comedians. Helen Paul, one of the female stand-up comedians in Nigeria said that, "comedy has brought food to my table". In Nigeria today, some families have been lifted out of the poverty line because the stand-up comedians have become their breadwinners, thereby healing them of their sorrows, tensions, anxieties and disconsolations.

Coupled with the above is that stand-up comedy has helped some of the nations of the world in reducing unemployment and enhancing foreign exchange earnings. Many of the stand-up comedians have showcased their talents outside their various countries. In Nigeria, for example, many of the comedians who have had the opportunity of travelling abroad have added value not only to themselves and their families, but also to their countries of origin. They achieve this through their foreign exchange earnings. These earnings have, in a large proportion, contributed to the gross domestic growth of the nation, like Nigeria. Many of the stand-up comedians produce their videos, CDs and DVDs which they sell not only in Nigeria, but in Europe and America. This brings a lot of foreign currencies into the country. Jeyifo explains this succinctly in his discussion of the way forward for Nollywood of which stand-up comedy is a genre. According to him.

The portentous success of Nollywood in the Africa Magic Channel is a pointer to the great significance of this Cinema tradition as first and foremost an industry, an economic powerhouse yet to reach its

potential. The figures here are quite staggering, even if they are subject to verification and authentication by careful and meticulous scholarly research. Between 1,500 to 2,000 films are produced every year...Finally, it is estimated that altogether, this is an industry that is worth between \$500,000 million to 1 billion dollars, providing employment to thousands of people in various categories of the technical and artistic division of labour that makes Nollywood as much a cultural and social institution as it is an industry. (591 - 592)

This is a right step in the right direction and stand-up comedy has helped and continues to help heal the nation and her citizens of unemployment, poor economy, boredom, tension, mental, and physical illness.

Some Selected Niger Delta Stand-up Comedians and their Therapeutic Functions

The Niger Delta region in Nigeria is a geo-political zone comprising nine states: Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. Like other regions in the country, it is characterised by militancy, banditry, killings, kidnapping, conflicts of terrifying proportions, political apprehensions, environmental degradation, to mention a few. These have led to fear, anxiety, insecurity, intimidation, harassment, molestation and all sorts of tensions among the people. Due to the above, many have lost their lives and their loved ones as a result of the terrible effect of the tension in the region. Apart from deaths that have continued to occur as a result of the kidnappings, ethnic conflicts and others, many have lost their lives through

hypertension, high blood pressure, cardiac arrest, suicide and many more.

On the 2nd of October 2003, BBC released a publication in which Nigeria was ranked number one on the list of the happiest people in the world out of the sixty five countries that were surveyed. However, this dropped in 2019, to number eighty five due to the prevailing circumstances in the country. Ayo Onikoyi, a member of the panel of communication experts at Viacom International Media Networks Africa's (VIMN Africa) forum in Lagos, raises an alarm on the waning comedy talent in Nigeria in recent times due to the effects of these negative tendencies. He reminds us of the comedian and actor, Bright Okpocha, popularly known as Basket Mouth, who drew attention to the dwindling status of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, and that the entertainment craft is gradually dying.

By and large in Nigeria today, the Niger-Delta region has more of the stand-up comedians and they have dominated the entertainment ministry in the country. Some of the well-known stand-up comedians in Niger Delta include (i) Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome, professionally known as Alli Baba. He has been a professional stand-up comedian for more than thirty years (1990 to 2021). According to him, "being funny is serious business". (ii) Abovi Ugboma whose stage name is Bovi (iii) Otagware Onodjeyeke (Otas) nicknamed "I Go Save" (iv) Chuks Julie Daniel popularly known as Chuks D. General (v) Steve Onu (Yaw) (vi) Okechukwu Anthony Onyegbule (Okey Bakassi) (vii) Julius Agwu (viii) Atamefuna Clinton Igwemba (Klint Da Drunk) (ix) Helen Paul (x) Jephthah Bowoto (Akpororo) (xi) Bright Okpocha (Basket Mouth) (xii) Francis Agoda (I Go Dye) and (xiii) Godwin Komone (Gordons). The upcoming stand-up comedians include (xiv) Kingsley Akpojotor (Liki Liki Mouth) (xv) MC Emma Ralo (xvi) Okoloko Papa (xvii) MC Double (xviii) Omoness (xix) Douglas (xx) MC Ekwakwa (xxi) Young Chief (xxii) Funny Timo (xxiii) MC Too Much (xxiv) MC Prophet (xxv) Youngest Landlord, etc.

This paper attempts to explicate the contributions of three selected Niger Delta stand-up comedians and how they have made themselves therapeutic tools in their performances. The selected artistes are: I Go Dye, Gordons and Liki Liki Mouth.

The Stand-up Comedy of I Go Dye

“I Go Dye” or “I Go Die” is a coinage from his surname, Agoda. He was born as Francis Agoda on April 4, 1979, in Abraka, Delta State of Nigeria. He grew up with his mother. While growing up, he witnessed numerous challenges facing rural settlements in Nigeria. This experience later influenced and motivated him in his comedy where he addressed some of these issues. His comedy career started early in his life. However, it was while he was at the College of Commerce, Warri, that he perfected his craft. While in the school, he joined the Press Literary Debating and Drama Society. He performed in different schools within the area to crack jokes until he became the master of his art. In 1994, along with his friend, Otagware Onodjejeke (I Go Save), he presented Mock News at the Delta Broadcasting Service (DBS), a television house owned by the state government. Later, he got a contract as a stand-up comedian at Prest Motel in Benin City, Edo State of Nigeria. He has performed in many stand-up comedy events in Nigeria and abroad. Notable among them are “Night of a Thousand Laughs” which ran yearly for more than ten years from year 2000. His performance at this yearly event earned him an award by the producer of the programme, Opa Williams, as the most outstanding comedian to have featured for ten years.

He had his first opportunity in 2005 to tour seven European countries. He was later contracted by NIDOE in France, to perform at the UNESCO Cultural Week in Paris. At that event, he was presented an award for his contribution to the uplift of Nigeria cultural values. He was featured in many outlets in Nigeria and abroad, including MTV Africa and has performed alongside international stand-up comedians. He has also taken his own brand

of comedy to countries outside Nigeria with the name, ‘Last Man Standing’. His performance has also earned him recognition by the United Nations due to his scintillating performance at the Nigeria’s Re-union show in Dallas, Texas. Akintayo Eribake describes him as ‘Africa’s next king of comedy’ and that “today, no comedy show is complete without Francis Agoda”. He goes further to say that, “Today, there is no way African comedy can be written without establishing the fact that I Go Dye was there”. He has featured in all the biggest comedy shows in Nigeria, including MTV Base and more. In fact, I Go Dye has produced many comedy skits too, and they are all on YouTube.

I Go Dye’s comedy has contributed greatly to healing the wounds of his audience and the masses. He has brought laughter to the fearful and the sorrowful and he has helped the people maintain a balanced health, psychologically and mentally. Not only that, he has used his comedy to call on government to provide jobs for the people. He believes that by providing jobs and good government, the society will live in peace. In one of the interviews he granted ‘Entertainment Today’, an online media portal, after one of his performances in ‘Night of a Thousand Laughs’, he says that, “I do not only tell jokes that will make people laugh; I use my time on stage to also crusade against social ills”. His ability to use his jokes to satirise and attack the evils bedevilling the society in order for the ills to die is a great effort on his part as a stand-up comedian. He uses his comedy to heal the society with the aim of bringing or promoting good governance and a healthy and happy living for the people.

In another interview granted to ‘Entertainment Today’, I Go Dye reveals further that, “I don’t crack jokes; I pick up national issues as they relate to our everyday lives and discuss them on stage in a humorous way”. This assertion lends credence to the fact that humour is used as an avenue to comment on the contemporary realities of the time and expose the ills therein in order to draw the attention of the people to the need for a positive change and heal the

society of corruption, kidnapping, banditry, marginalisation and all forms of negativity. Juliet Ebirin informs us that the Nigerian army, through the Chief of Staff, General T. Y. Buratai (now retired), recognised the healing role of I Go Dye when he was presented with an award of commendation for positivity, projecting the laudable virtues of the institution and his unwavering support. Reacting to the award, I Go Dye says:

I feel honoured by this, but it will be more gratifying to me when I see our leaders create more opportunities for the youths and make efforts to gainfully employ them...As of today, millions of Africans are suffering and faced with uncertainty... Until this personal desire for a better Africa is achieved, my heart knows no profound happiness because someone is still sleeping without a meal. (YouTube Inter.)

The above is an indication that I Go Dye is very much interested in ensuring that the average African gets food to eat and is happy. He seriously advocates for employment opportunities for all and for a better continent of Africa. Not only does he advocate this, he practicalises it by using his money to take care of the less-privileged. Eribake corroborates this when he says that I Go Dye “may not have a foundation, but he gives a helping hand when he sees a brother in need”. Through his magnanimity, many families have been relieved of fear, sorrow, tension and anxiety which ordinarily would have led to some health challenges. I Go Dye has used his comedy to provide employment for those who sought his help and has contributed his quota to making the society a place to be. His attacks on bad governance have earned him many accolades. Indeed, he has done very well in his chosen profession.

The Stand-up Comedy of Gordons

His real name is Godwin Komone. He grew up in Warri and was educated at Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka, Nigeria where he studied Integrated Science. Right from his days in the University, he was involved in different shows either as the Master of Ceremonies or as a comedian. He developed his comedy talents while in school. Along with I Go Dye, he is one of the greatest stand-up comedians in the Niger Delta and Nigeria as a whole. Gordons, as he is popularly called, has been involved in many comedy programmes within and outside the country. Some of these platforms include AY Live shows and Nite of a Thousand Laughs.

Between 2010 and 2017, he produced seven CDs entitled ‘Comedy Clinic’ which he describes as “an alternative therapy for stress and high blood pressure”. In fact, the title of the CD is a clear pointer to the fact that he has set out from the outset, to use his comedy for healing purposes. Worthy of note is that he refers to each of the editions of the CDs as a “Ward”, hence he has Comedy Clinic Wards 1 to 7. A clinic is a “place where outpatients are given medical care or advice” or “a place where medical specialists practice as a group; a private or a specialised hospital; the teaching of medicine by treating patients in the presence of students”. His naming of his brand using medical terms like “clinic” and “ward” shows his desire to heal through comedy. He has largely used his comedy clinic as a therapeutic tool to heal the depressed, the angry and the nation in general. In an interview granted him by Channels TV, Nigeria, on February 14, 2015, he refers to himself as a “doctor” who uses his comedy to heal. According to him, “I am still a doctor but I practice through comedy clinic”.

He ends most of his comedy clinic CDs with the following words: “This is Gordons’ comedy clinic where sicknesses and diseases, depression, sadness, sorrows and bitterness are treated and forgotten forever”. Furthermore, he uses his ‘Comedy Clinic’ to offer pieces of advice in order to help his audience think well, plan well and gain mental balance. For example, he ends Comedy Clinic

Ward 5, with words of encouragement: “the downfall of a man is not the end of his life”. In Ward 6, he admonishes that, “whatever what you go through in life, remember to turn your pain to gain, pressure to power” and that “whatever you are going through, don’t give up. Tomorrow, people will celebrate you”. In Ward 7, he says, “If you have not been mocked or disgraced, your miracle is not near”. The above are clear pointers to a comedian who has set aside to use his comedy for therapeutic purposes.

The Stand-up Comedy of Liki Liki Mouth

His name is Kingsley Akpojotor. His stage name is MC Liki Liki Mouth. He was born and brought up in Warri, Delta State of Nigeria. He is a graduate of English from Delta State University (DELSU), Abraka. He has diploma in Law of the same university. It was during his diploma programme that he got the nickname, “Liki Liki Mouth.” It happened that in one of the lectures, a lecturer had asked one of the students, a girl, to define ‘Land Law’. The girl was just moping and in order to display his intellectual prowess, he answered the question. This got the lecturer angry by rebuffing him to stop “leaking” his mouth. After the lecture, his colleagues started calling him, “Liki Liki Mouth” which he thereafter adopted as his stage name.

He has won a couple of awards which include “Best Comedian in DELSU” for three consecutive years and the “Best Youth Corper Comedian” in Adamawa State. He has organised a few comedy shows and has produced three volumes of his comedy CDs entitled: “Unlimited Laughter with MC Liki Liki Mouth”. The maiden edition was in 2010. In the interview he granted this writer, he expressed the fact that he uses his comedy to heal and make people laugh. According to him,

I use my comedy to educate. I use my
comedy to teach the realities of life in a
funny way. I make people to see life in
another perspective. Everyone

experiences pain but I use my comedy to reconstruct that pain into laughter. I use imagery to create a pleasant environment to replace bitter ones. I use my comedy to evoke laughter, and laughter releases endorphins ... So, when you feel better after laughing, you really are happier and healthier. Laughing is also a full body workout. At times, I make the people to laugh very hard, the kind where their stomach will hurt thereby increasing blood, oxygen and strengthens their internal muscles and then release them of depression. Once they listen to my comedy, their spirits are revived. (YouTube Inter.)

At present, he is not among the internationally recognised comedians, but he is doing well in the Niger-Delta area. In fact, he craves for recognition internationally. This is why he says that “I want to become an internationally recognised MC and comedian who anchors events for the president and international organisations. I want to be seen as a role model for up and coming comedians”.

Conclusion

Comedy performance is thriving in Nigeria especially in the Niger Delta area despite the Covid-19 pandemic, corruption and other vices that are plaguing the world at the moment. It is fast becoming one of the lucrative businesses in the region. Peace Esebuio observes that,

Comedy in Nigeria is becoming more interesting and worthwhile by the day. Comedy concerts now attract a great

crowd of VIPs as well as ordinary people whenever it is held anywhere in the country. As it gets more rewarding and funnier, people are becoming more willing to make comedy their career or to part with their money in order to enjoy comedy shows. (Youtube Inter.)

The more serious comedy is, the more it has attracted and still attracting the audience because of the positive effects it has on the society. Its relevance to the society is overwhelming. Apart from providing entertainment, education and information, comedy in Nigeria, especially in the Niger-Delta region of the country, has been used by the artists, to provide healing to the teeming populace. Boredom has its negative consequences on people. The stand-up comedians, especially I Go Dye, Gordons and Liki Liki Mouth, have used their comedies to engage the people hence the issue of boredom is fast becoming history. Many people now purchase comedy CDs. Some also prefer to watch these comedians on social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram.

Apart from reducing boredom, the stand-up comedians, especially the ones studied in this paper, have used their comedies to eradicate tension, depression, hypertension, cardiac arrests, and all forms of ill-health including mental health and psychological imbalance.

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