



Calabar Humaphors: An Analysis of Selected Jokes in Nigerian Stand Up Comedy

Juliet Nkane Ekpang and Victor Bassey

Department of English & Literary Studies, University of Calabar (Nigeria)

julietekpang@yahoo.com/ vbassey87@yahoo.com

+2347038557627/+2348037972772

ABSTRACT

Nigeria's stand-up comedy bears some uniqueness that sets it apart as distinctively Nigerian. It mirrors certain societal resemblance and awake in the audience reactions towards such: acceptance or rejection, tolerance or outright repudiation. One of the ways through which this is done, is by the use of Calabar humaphors. This paper sets out to study these humaphors using the metaphor theory. This theory, apart from expressing human experience, also projects some realities and convincing resemblance between different concepts of life. Sample-expressions have been selected from recordings of nine selected comedy events, examined and analyzed for their semantic peculiarity. Findings show that through the instrumentality of this kind of metaphors, certain linguistic, social and cultural concerns of the people have been misconstrued and satirically fore-grounded, thereby eliciting audience reaction and discourse. The work concludes that the comic presentation of the Calabar man is either misplaced or theatrical and does not have a true representation of the Calabar people.

Key words: Humaphor, metaphor theory, stand-up comedy.

INTRODUCTION

Stand up comedy is an act in which the artist (comedian) performs in front of a live audience. This act involves the recitation of a string of jokes with the purpose of eliciting spontaneous laughter and other humourous audience reactions. These jokes are called 'bits' while the act is called a 'routine' (Orhiunu: 2012). The routine is a monologue which typically presents issues

Analysis of Selected Jokes in Nigerian Stand Up Comedy

and problems that are culturally intelligible in such a manner that they are laughable. The history of stand up comedy dates back to the 18th century in the United Kingdom and the 19th century in the United States of America (Wikipedia). In Nigeria it has its roots in certain oral traditions like the “njakiri” in Igbo traditional oral culture and equivalents in other ethnic communities.

According to Ogechi (2012), there are two substantive incidences that marked the evolution of modern day stand up comedy in Nigeria. She refers to these incidences as the registration of “Ali Baba hiccupurathied” as a public liability company in 1998 and the subsequent billboard advertorial later that same year, with the caption “Ali Baba-being funny is serious business”, which stayed up for two years. This was against the business backdrop that comedians were hardly taken seriously and the act was not a promising carrier to up-coming artists who were sometimes asked to perform in ceremonies without being paid.

Today however, stand-up comedy thrives in Nigeria through comedy clubs like AY show, comedy live in Lagos and Teju Babyface comedy club, theatres where people pay to watch comedian(s) perform and through the commercial distribution of DVDs and VCDs. Some stand-up comedians in Nigeria are Julius Agu, Ali Baba ,I Go Die, AY, Klint D Drunk, Gordons, Basketmouth, Last Prophet, Aboki for Christ, I Go Save, Buchi , Babyface. Ejim Chijioke,Elvis, Toygod, and Omen. Some of these names are artists without border. They are multitalented, with some vying into music and even movies.

Defining humaphors

Humaphors is a coinage through the morphological concept of ‘clipping’ word formation. It was first used by Richard Nordquist to describe the kinds of jokes used by Stephen Colbert, an American stand-up comedian. Below is an example of this usage.

Everybody asks for personnel changes. So the White House has personnel changes. Then your write, “Oooh, they’re just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic”. First of all, that is a terrible metaphor. This administration is not sinking... (White House Correspondents’ Dinner, April 29, 2006).

Humaphors are kinds of jokes that combine jokes (humour) and metaphor. Humor, which is the possibility of certain visual or verbal experiences evoking laughter for pleasure purposes, is context dependent. Most people respond to humor and are thus described as having a good sense of humor. Certain contextual factors are taken into consideration to achieve this feat. This includes the linguistic, religious, economic, cultural and geographical background of the audience before whom the joke is presented. These factors guide the standup comedian and help him articulate the kinds of jokes best

suited for his audience and which can elicit the kind of spontaneous laughter in form of response.

The language of stand-up comedy is basically witty but context based. Another linguistic tool used to elicit laughter is to draw comparisons between what is known and common to describe what is relatively unknown. This linguistic tool is called metaphor. Metaphor expresses the unfamiliar (tenor) in terms of the familiar (vehicle). If we say for example that “life is a journey”, “journey” is the vehicle for “life”, the tenor. Aristotle in his book *Rhetoric* (1995) emphasizes the importance of metaphor stating that: “those words are most pleasant which give us new knowledge. Strange words have no meaning for us; common terms we know already. It is metaphor which gives us most of this pleasure”.

Metaphors vary. Richard Nordquist in “grammar.com” identifies thirteen types of metaphors namely: absolute, complex, conceptual, creative, therapeutic conventional, dead, extended, mixed, primary, root, submerged and visual metaphors. Of interest to this study is the type called Root Metaphor. Root metaphor according to Nordquist, “is an image, narrative or fact”, that is used to “shape an individual’s perception and interpretation of reality”. In this study for example we will look at the metaphorical meaning of the Calabar man or woman as propagated by Nigerian stand up comedians. This image of the Calabar man or woman, now popular, is the product of certain lexical terminologies used by stand up comedians. Their ability to develop a particular stereotype through humorous comparisons, I have referred to as “Humaphors”.

Calabar in Nigeria

Calabar, the Capital of Cross River State is in the South-south geo-political region of Nigeria. It is a metropolitan city and the confluence of peoples of different tribes and languages. The Lingua franca of the people of Calabar is English, but the mother tongue is Efik (Calabar South & Municipality) and Ejagham (Big-Quo part of Calabar Municipality).

Calabar is an ancient city with many myths and stories attributed to it. One such myth is that of men abandoning their wives once they arrive Calabar and are ‘cared’ for, by Calabar women. It is the city with the statue of Mary Slessor, a Scottish Missionary who stopped the killing of twins among the locals. Calabar is also the first Capital city of Southern Protectorate of Nigeria.

Among the traditional practices of the people of Calabar is the formal training of maidens of marriageable age as transition into womanhood. The institution is called “*nkugho*” (the fattening room). In this institution, young women who have come of age and need to be taught the basic home making skills like cooking, care of the body, relationships with members of the extended family and sexual skills. They are also massaged and fed to loosen

Analysis of Selected Jokes in Nigerian Stand Up Comedy

up tight muscles around their thighs and arms thereby giving the girls a fresh but obese look.

The English language spoken by people in Calabar can be located within the four basic types of English in Nigeria as classified by Adekunle (1979) and Obiechina (1974). These include; the Educated variety, the near native speaker variety, the incipient bilingual/local color variety and Pidgin English. The near native speaker variety is spoken by people who have had long contact with mother tongue speakers of the English language while the educated variety is spoken by some members of the educated elite class (The University of Calabar is situated in the heart of Calabar). The incipient bilingual/local color variety is a kind of cocktail of lexical items, syntactic structures and phonological features of both English and the indigenous language: Efik and Ejagham. This is more pronounced in the accents and interchange of certain English sounds like /d / for /j/ in ‘yam’ and /j/ for /t / in “champion”.

Pioneers of Nigerian soap opera like “The village headmaster” and “The New Masquerade” had characters which supposedly depicted Calabar people and consequently helped in establishing the stereotype of the Calabarian. In “The Village Headmaster”, we had characters like Bassey Okon (who always resorted to the use of a machete at any provocation), Boniface, his shop assistant and Ekaette, his daughter. In “The New Masquerade”, there was the character of Gringory Acabota of Ikot Ekpene who perfected the act of a stupid houseboy with accents that strongly resemble that of a Calabar bilingual incipient speaker of English. But that was when the present day Cross River State was also home to the Akwa Ibomites . The true identity of such stereotypes could be deciphered from the identity of Gringory , a flat character in *The New Masquerade*, who hails from Ikot Ekpene , a Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State.

Some of the local delicacies of the natives of Calabar are *ekpangkukwo*, *afang*, *edikanikong* and “404” (dog meat). The cooking of these meals is adequately taught in the fattening room and homes.

Humaphors from Calabar

For purposes of clarity, the humaphors will be discussed under four sub-types: (1) phonological humor, (2) behavioral traits (3) Sexual allusions and (4) names.

1. Phonological humor:

As earlier stated, jokes on accents depict the manifestation of mother tongue interference at both phonetic and supra segmental levels of phonology. This is an example of regional variety based humor. Regional accent is a popular ingredient for jokes in standup comedy in Nigeria as every tribe is marked by some Mother Tongue interference. A mere mention of a particular

interference or speech style elucidates laughter directed at a particular ethnic group or tribe. Below are examples of this kind of jokes.

1a. Title: *Calabar man*

Comedian: Elvis

An English man was once with a Yoruba and Calabar man. The English man said: "O I feel like eating chicken" and the Yoruba man answered him saying look at this man calling *sicken* chicken and the Calabar man intruded into the matter and said to the Yoruba man, hey look at this Yoruba man calling *yicken* sicken...

b. Title: *Love Calabar*

Comedian: Toygod 2

I was in Tinapa three weeks ago to compare a show with Etim Essang. Before my performance, I went round the town to see any funny thing I could get and add to my preparedness... after much walk, I decided to chillax in a Bar and restaurant. While I ordered for a drink, a man I met there kept starring at the endowments of the waitress. She got me my drink and the man was still starring without ordering anything... out of curiosity, the waitress asked: *uka* (Oga), this one u dey *rook* (look) me *tinse* (since). U won *yop* (chop)?...

In the two afore mentioned jokes, the following phonological deductions can be made through phonological reduction-a process of collapsing complicated sounds by replacing difficult phonetics with easier ones :

"Calabar Man" by Elvis

Yoruba man -> /s/ for /t /

Calabar man -> /j/ for /t /

"Love Calabar" by toygods

/k/ in "uka" as a replacement for /g/ in "Oga"

/r/ in "rook" as a replacement for /l/ in "look"

/t/ in "tinse" as a replacement for /s/ in "since"

/j/ in "yop" as a replacement for /t / in "chop"

Because, these jokes are meant for actual performance on stage, it is impossible to represent in writing the aspect of prosodic features like tone and "face" (Crystal, 1994).

2a. Title: *Calabar man*

Comedian: Elvis

We were in a conference one day, they ask one Calabar man to make sentence with "Green, pink and yellow. The man looked up and down, he said: "when the phone ring green green green, I *pink* am and I say *yellow*".

In the example above, the replacement is noticed in /y/ -yellow instead of /h/-hello.

3b. Title: *Mou mou man*

Analysis of Selected Jokes in Nigerian Stand Up Comedy

Comedian: Ejm Chijioke

One day in a restaurant owned by a Calabar man, 3 men came to eat. One is Igbo, the others Yoruba and Hausa man. The Hausa man finished eating, on his way out, the Calabar man demanded for money and the Hausa man replied, I gave you money when you served me, and the Calabar man let him go.

Yoruba man finished eating and lied as the Hausa man did. The Igbo man finished eating the first plate he was served and demanded for extra plate and told the Calabar man to package take away for him. On his way out, the Calabar man asked for money and the Igbo man frowned his face and replied, haven't I paid? Moreover, you are still owing me change.

In these jokes, the Comedian alludes to regional characteristic stupidity on the part of the Calabar man. Both jokes on accents and stupidity can be traced to the character of Gringory in the once popular T.V. drama in Nigeria "the New Masquerade", and Boniface in "The Village Headmaster".

3a. Title: *Calabar Girls*

Comedian: Basket Mouth

Calabar girls, I too dey like their style
Because they really no how to take care of man.
Dem go cook for you
Dem go wash your cloth
Dem go make your belle make e sweet
Na inside bedroom dem dey get their power...
Dem get degree for sexology
Dem be professors for knackiology
E reach bedmatics dem no dey taya
Because Calabar girls they are ever ready
Maybe na the dog meat wey dem dey chop
Maybe na dat one dey give dem extra power

3b. Title: *Dog & Calabar man*

Comedian: Omen

A wealthy man has a bulldog called showbobo that he never let out of his fence. On Christmas day he decided to open his gate. A Calabar man was passing by and the dog followed the man. The wealthy man said to the dog: "showbobo come back here for 5 times" but the dog wouldn't listen.

After trying all possible means to call back the dog, the wealthy man said: "Showbobo that man na Calabar man O".

Sharp sharp, the dog turn back and ran.

The dog fear for him life.

3c. Title: *Dog for Calabar man*

Comedian: *Last Prophet.*

No be small tin o. Police think say dog dey always catch thief. Na im dem send their big dog straight into Igbo man house. Everybody including a 9

month old baby run out . Dem do same for Yoruba man and Hausa man house, dem all including cripple and Alhaji run out. Na im dem go try am for Calabar man house, the dog no return. Dem wait sotey dem come vex break the door. As dem enter the house, wetin dem see my broda, Calabar man dey chop the dog with palmy (palm wine). No be small tin o.

While Joke 3a (*Calabar Girls*) centers on sexual imagery, 3b (*the dog and the Calabar man*) and 3c (*Dog for Calabar man*) sound like an extension of the end of joke 3a. 3a eulogizes the home management and sexual prowess of the Calabar woman, though, in a negative way. It ends by proposing that the sexual prowess may be as a result of the delicacy (dog meat) eaten by Calabarians. This is extended metaphor. Dogs are seen as animals that engage in vigorous sexual exercise, so by eating them, the Calabarian supposedly acquires uncommon sexual skills. Joke 3b is a kind of hyperbole that exaggerates the intelligence of a bull dog. But 3c exposes the strong penchant a typical Calabar man has for the eating of dog meat. Dogs, from the joke in 3c are neither pets nor security aids to the Calabar man. They are considered to be meat just as any other meat, meant to eaten.

4a. Title: *Calabar no dey try*

Comedian: Elvis

If you go Calabar church na very big problem you dey si. You no dey no who dey preach and who dey interpret and if you go mistake put calabar man for work another big problem! One guy wen dem employ for work, na manager say make he go store him name for computer and this guy name na wahala: efongatekpenkefnofno! Immediately computer receives the name, computer hala: “error error error”!!

4b. Title: *Calabar girls*

Comedian: Basket mouth

Na their names dey sweet me pass. The kind names wey Calabar girls dey get, u go hear Nfonobong, Itorobong, Ekambong, Etembong, Itimbong, Ekaibong - dem go the bom bom ti bom bom bom.

Here both Elvis and Basket Mouth identify the uniqueness of Calabar names but in such a way as to provoke laughter. The name efongatekpenkefnofno is first of all very long (about 8 syllables) which though not unusual, as most African names are a string of sentence, yet suggest an extreme case just to evoke a sound effect of a breakable plate falling and shattering down the staircase with an accompanying deafening noise. There is also the incidence of cacophonous sounds resulting from regular consonant clustering /kp/ and /fn/. The theatrical aim is to portray the Efik language as a cacophonous one replete with consonant clusters that are difficult to understand, learn or teach-with the end desire of evoking laughter. But most of the humor is generated from the accentual performance of the comedian. Basket mouth, in addition, is able to generate sexual images with his joke by repeating the sound /bom/ which is another word for “buttocks” and a sensual part of the human body. This, he is able to enact through

proxemics and histrionics by using the elevated stage to twist his waist and pelvic regions during this performance to the delight of the on-looker, who then liken what they see on stage to the sexual skills of Calabar people.

CONCLUSION

Humaphors are distinct tools in modern-day stand-up comedy. They are used for stereotyping the experiences of a people as can be seen in the examples identified above. Calabar Humaphors have elements of social satire that feed on tribal and sensual humour. They are rendered in pidgin as well as in local color varieties of Nigerian English, because most times the audience is mixed.

The use of Humaphors in Calabar though as a joke, has generated and extended the meaning of the word 'Calabar' in a number of ways. As illustrated by the excerpts above, the word "Calabar" has in addition to its exotic meaning as a peaceful, historical city and one of Nigeria's cleanest city, the connotations of sexual prowess, great culinary skills, peculiar English and most embarrassingly - stupidity on the part of its people. The humour in all is derived from (a) the mocked difficult Efik phonetics as captured in the consonant clustering and clapping, complicated sounds resulting from phonological reduction and onomatopoeic sounds in the local names, (b) the strong sex-symbol which has been attached to a Calabar woman/man because of the perceived strength they get from dog meat-the dog-sex strength symbol (c) the use of Calabar characters as flat characters assigned with stupid, clownish and never-grow roles in literary works.

This study has shown that these extended meanings have their origins in the history, cultural practices of the people and in the characters of certain popular soap operas in the 70's and 80's. But the influx of modern American soap operas and Nigerian home movies like "*Mutanda*", "*Amazing Grace*", and "*Cross and Tinapa*" in which Calabar characters are portrayed round, and are personified as intelligent, creative and productive people as well as the quantum of movie artists from Calabar like Keppy Ekpeyong Basse, Kate Henshaw Nutal, Vivian Anani and Shan George should put to rest the stereotype of the stupid Calabarian. The political history of Nigeria as well as the present day representatives at both local and global arenas of politics, educational and economic circles attest to this.

In concluding, it is worth stating that whereas through the instrument of humaphors by Stand-up comedians, the linguistic, cultural and social concerns of the Calabar people have been so comically fore-grounded for theatrical purposes, current realities in the literary, tourism, entertainment and academic sectors speak otherwise for the Calabar people as educated, enterprising, sociable and hospitable people .

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adekunle, M. A. (1979). The standard Nigerian English in sociolinguistic perspective. *Journal of the Nigerian English Studies Association*. (JNESA). Vol. 6. No. 1.
- Basketmouth (2012) Night of a Thousand Laughs. Vol 22. Retrieved from www.youtube.com.
- Crystal, D. (1995). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gramely, S. (2001). *The vocabulary of world English*. London: Arnold
- Grey, W. (2000). <http://www.wie/philos/vol4/metaphor.html>. literary use of metaphor in some depth.
- Garver, E. (1995). *Aristotle's Rhetoric: An art of character*. Chicago: the university of Chicago press.
- Laurence M. E. (ND) "Make em laugh: The funny business of America" ISBN 978-0-446-59531-4.
- "Nigerian Jokes" Retrieved from www.onlinenigeria/jokes/ad/1-2184.
- Nordquist R. (ND) "Humaphors: The top 10 metaphors of Stephen Colbert" Retrieved from www.grammar.about.com> Rhetoric and Style.
- Nordquist, R. (ND) "Metaphors- definitions and examples" Retrieved from www.grammar.About.com
- Nordquist, R. (ND) "Using similes and metaphors to enrich our writing- thirteen ways of looking at a metaphor" Retrieved from www.grammar.about.com>grammar and composition>rhetoric and style.
- Obiechina E. N. (1974). Varieties differentiation in English usage. *Journal of the Nigerian English studies association*. (JNESA) Vol. 6. No. 1.
- Ogechi, O. (2012). AY champions Nigeria's comedy business" Retrieved from www.nigerianpilot.com.
- Orhiunu, W. (ND). Niggerology" Retrieved from cwporter.com/niggerology.htm, <http://www.africanpath.com>
- Tiena, M. (2010). Nigeria entertainment and the growth of standup comedy" Retrieved from questionmark.com
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/standup_comedy.