

Humour, satire and the emergent stand-up comedy: A diachronic appraisal of the contributions of the masking tradition

Bernard Eze Orji

Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria
bernard.orji@funai.edu.ng

Abstract

Masking is a phenomenon that is traced to almost all human ages, from its prehistoric and primitive narratives in Africa, its dramatic beginnings in ancient Greece and Rome, to its use as forms of character delineation in the commedia dell'Arte of the 16th and 18th century Europe, as well as its age long association with carnivals due largely to its analogous relation to humour and entertainment. Masking, as comic as it may seem, has been critical of humanity's social dispositions from time past. As humans, the façade of the mask is a leeway to speak truth to power and also an opportunity for the performance of self in ways that are at variant with the real self. As topical as the activities of the masquerade are to the society, no academic quest has been directed to investigate how humour and satire have always been associated with the masquerade. Following the social criticism, humour and entertainment which have become evidently inherent in the emergent stand-up comedy, scholars have directed their critical attention towards this new live theatre without considering the humorous functions of the masquerade for an academic enquiry. It is against this backdrop that this paper has decided to investigate and re-establish historically the humorous contributions of the masking art in almost all facets of human conditions. The resources for the paper are a combination of library and historical research. The paper establishes that satire and humour, as enjoyed in all venues of stand-up comedy acts in Nigeria, are just a contemporary addition to what masks had done in the past but for dearth of proper documentation of these contributions. The masking tradition has been a source of humour and sarcasm to issues bordering on human relations all over the world.

Keywords: masquerade, humour, satire, stand-up comedy.

1. Introduction: conceptual clarifications

Humour, satire, stand-up comedy acts and masquerade are different concepts and phenomena that reveal the relative approach to the ways we encounter and view our socio-cultural engagements. The relativity of humour is a demonstration of societal differences and cultural

practices. What this presupposes is that what titillates an individual into laughter might be a drab remark and suppressed by yet another in the same circumstances. Societies through their mores reveal and embody different scenarios for which humour can be enticed, elicited, enjoyed, and patronised. Humour is situational and societally configured and delivered. According to Bamidele (2001), two studies are instructive to the idea of humour being culture-bound. The first is Vivian Mercier's book *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1991). The other is an essay by Paul Gifford (1981) titled "Humour and the French mind...". Both studies agree on the need for defining humour according to a peoples' experience. To buttress further, the question to ask is how the notion of humour enters the cultural consciousness of a people? The need to understand humour vis-à-vis any cultural background is the reason why humour has denied an absolute definition according to Gifford (1981: 537).

In Encyclopaedia Britannica (1979: 198), humour is defined as a type of simulation that elicits the laughter reflex. Aristotle (quoted in Bamidele 2001: 45) describes it in terms of ugliness or defect, which is not painful or destructive but which we tend to laugh at. Humour reflects man's delight in laughing at himself and sometimes the ugly situation or society he has built. The Encyclopedia further avers that humour stimulates the laughter reflex that resides in other forms of amusement such as farce, comedy, burlesque, and parody. Humour's sociological and anthropological slant resonates in Knuuttila's (2010: 33) assertion thus, "the research of humour, the comic and laughter has always included the premise of ambivalence, paradox, and incongruity". According to him, to understand the essence and concept of humour, it is paramount to reduce its interpretation within the premise of an entity, context, figurative speech, tropes, politics, sex, and ethnicity. It is within these compartmentalisations that one sees humour as socially contextual and individually engaging. Like Knuuttila had earlier declared, the ambivalent nature of humour finds relevance in its sociological and anthropological frameworks. It is a concept hinged on survivalist undertones deployed by subalterns against the state. Obadare (2009: 247) revealed that "humour's potency as a social technique, is its use to disrupt a social order". Humour is a powerful social technique with which to 'get under the skin' of people in power. Obadare (2009: 245) asserts that "expensive or cheap, jokes have always been iconic tools in the hands of society's subalterns, used to caricature those in power, subvert authority, and, in some instances, empower themselves".

Humour and its social functions have been studied by scholars including Henri Bergson. In his seminal work *Laughter: An Essay on the meaning of the Comic* (1911), Bergson states that humour is a social tool by which we mildly scold each other for being insufficiently adaptive and flexible. He further articulated three rules guiding laughter:

1. Comedy is necessarily human: we laugh at people or things they do.
2. Laughter is purely cerebral: being able to laugh seems to require a detached attitude, an emotional distance to the object of laughter.
3. Laughter has a social function.

(Bergson 1911: 309.)

However, it is the third rule on the social functionality of laughter that will further the understanding of this study. This is because the social function of laughter most often is an aftermath of criticism where individuals or group of people are directly or indirectly ridiculed before the public for acting at variance with the established norms of the society they belong to. In this instance, group learning that stems from critical appraisals of individuals or groups are established. This is in tandem with the position expressed by Bergson in his work, that humour can be used in social situations to bring people together and give them something to relate to or talk about. Humour may not be an outright condemnable approach in social relations as it serves a corrective measure in communities in need of positive change from individuals and groups. This should be encouraged in places where its application is adopted openly, like in masquerade performance examples. Following this approach, individuals or

groups become subjects of ridicule, sarcasm, lampooning, and mockery, for failing in their ways to be part of an ideal society. Bergson again sees humour in this scenario as a helpful way to deal with awkward social situations and more as a way in which individuals within societies and communities correct one another.

Humour as a generic term linked to any situation, attitude, appearance, disposition, and its general demeanour is an age long phenomenon. It is culture specific, too, because the humour which is generated or stimulated is tied extensively to human behavioural patterns and culture itself. In the words of Auslander (2004: 107), comedy “by definition requires certain referents, norms against which behaviours may be deemed humorous,” the absence of which makes it “impossible to define comedy”. This means that for comedy to thrive, it has to lend itself most appropriately to the differing vicissitudes of acceptable humour corpus within the society. Culture itself is very central to humour and scholars and humour theorists agree that humour is culture specific (Bamidele 2001:87).

Humour is unique and a universally human phenomenon, which is seen in virtually all aspects of human endeavour; life, relationships, and social engagements. However, this promiscuous and ubiquitous nature of humour has characteristically left it without definite definition as corroborated by scholars such as Apte (1963), Mindess (1971), and Fry & Savin (1988). Fry & Savin (1988), for instance, believe humour to be a frame of mind and having a therapeutic power. For some others, humour is its physical manifestation, that is, laughter; nevertheless, many others feel humour is the comic, the funny, or the ludicrous. Carrell admits that humour is synonymous with wit and comedy (Carrell 2008: 3). From Plato, Aristotle, Cicero to 19th and 20th century humour scholars and theorists, humour is viewed in the words of Carrell (2008: 3), “as rooted in disparagement, aggression, and malice has continued to thrive, as we laugh at absurdity, at deformity, at mischief, at what we do not believe, to show satisfaction with ourselves, or our contempt for those about us, or to conceal our envy or ignorance.” As diverse as the meaning, context and content of the application of humour may seem, it is captured in totality by Carrell (2008: 10):

In the lead article of the first issue of the only academic journal devoted entirely to humour scholarship, HUMOUR: International Journal of Humour Research, Apte observes, “[n]ot only does humour occur in all human cultures, it also pervades all aspects of human behaviour, thinking, and sociocultural reality; it occurs in an infinite variety of forms and uses varied modalities” (1988, 7). It is because of this “infinite variety of forms and ... varied modalities” that the study of humour must be and is a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary field of inquiry. Its boundaries are indistinct and blurred by the many researchers and scholars who investigate and have investigated humour from a variety of different perspectives, many looking for and at very different aspects of the same subject.

The recent upsurge in venues where stand-up comedy has come to be identified with sarcasm and humour is an indication that the old tradition of masking art has not really been given its rightful place in the scholarly circle as a platform where humour, satire and laughter had been generated and enjoyed in the past.

Having made enough clarifications on the concept of humour, attention will be directed at satire. Like every social phenomenon, there has been no rightly accepted definition of what satire is. Scholars based on their own societal dispositions to life tend to define the concept as it suits them. Wilson (2001: 26) defines satire as an “art form related to traditional burlesque, but with more intellectual and moral content”. It is this intellectual and moral value of satire that differentiates it with other forms of high comedy. He continued that “satire employs wit, irony, and exaggeration to attack or expose evil and foolishness. Satire can attack one figure... or it can be more inclusive” (Wilson 2001: 27). It is believed that satire that attacks an entire society is an exception to the notion that comedy usually exposes individuals who are foolish

and excessive rather than criticise society. Satire as a performance genre is a form of social control, a mechanism for checkmating societal, group, or individual excesses. Bamidele (2001: 28), in theorising about satire in society, says that the genre came about in a cultural climate that saw the form of literature in the service of its didactic intent. In all facets of life, man needs to conform to a social norm; hence, satire in its various methods and styles, irony, parody, invective, sarcasm, and wit are a ready weapon.

In most cases, our enjoyment and understanding of satire in text or on stage derives from our thought of political ineptitude or inadequacy of leaders, a system or an institution. According to Bamidele (2001: 29), satire is used to poke fun while criticizing politicians and other members of the society who may have gone contrary to the established ideals of the people. Political wit can be directed against social groups, circles, or strata whose social position is contested: the nouveau rich, the hostility of the state, the conqueror, the police, the judge, doctors, priests, and religious leaders. These people become the butt of satirical jibes or jokes when they act at variance with the norms of civilised societies. Like every societal phenomenon, there has been no rightly accepted definition of what satire is. Abraham (1981: 167), however, defines satire as: “the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it, an attitude of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn”. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides, that is, it uses laughter as a weapon and against a butt existing outside the work itself. Moody on his part defines a satire as “any form or piece of writing which is deliberately and humorously critical in intention” (Moody 1968: 208), while Barnett et al. (1976: 266) contend that “satire is a work ridiculing aspects of human behaviour and seeking to arouse in the audience contempt for its object”. In the same vein May says that satire is a work which ridicules or holds up to scorn the vices, crimes, and absurdities of men and individuals, of class and organisations of societies and civilisations. Satire – “the art of laughter with knives” (Bamidele 2001: 32) – is certainly a social art, because the satirist mocks, attacks, and ridicules actions of men and societal ills in order to sanitise society. This art form has been used by artists for a long time. Even in traditional societies, people often use proverbs and folktales to ridicule and attack unwholesome attitudes of men and society as a whole. Stand-up acts and masquerade performance are amongst other forms of performance with as much corrective and didactic purpose as satire.

This enquiry has therefore set out to diachronically establish the roles played by masking culture in Nigeria within the concepts of satire and humour as we have now in the emergent stand-up comedy.

2. Masking cultures through the ages

Masking traditions exist on all the continents of the world. Its beginning is still a subject of conjecture and debate, but its original functions support the assumption that it was part of Paleolithic man’s artistic and spiritual rendition of the physio-metaphysical environment. Mitchell (1985: 3) reveals that the significance of the mask associated with primitive rituals was essentially its capacity to effect change. The change brought about by the wearing of the mask manifested itself not only within the wearer, but also outside, in the world he contacted. The primitive mask allowed one reality to be supplanted by another, as it granted its wearer the power and freedom to perform unconventional acts. The impulses which prompted these unconventional acts were rooted in belief rather than knowledge. It was this belief that allowed the masker to poke fun, satirise, mimic, and impersonate individuals or groups who had performed below societal standards. This knowledge about the scenario surrounding this

caricature and mockery ultimately elicited laughter. The Encyclopedia Britannica (1979: 586) describes masks as:

A form of disguise ... an object that is frequently worn over or in front of the face to hide the identity of a person and by its own features to establish another being. This essential characteristic of hiding and revealing personalities or moods is common to all masks. As cultural objects they have been used throughout the world in all periods since the Stone Age and have been as varied in appearance as in their use and symbolism.

This description must be extended, for a mask may be borne on the head with the masker's face visible, or it may consist of a head and face piece. Ododo's (2001) theory of facekura supports this assertion, where the face is without a covering in performance. But this is not the trajectory of this essay, because masks as an avatar and a façade of disguise energise the masker's purpose and significance which leads to humour, the thrust of this essay.

The concept of the mask in performance culture is one that is known to almost all theatrical traditions of the world, right from the classical periods of the Greeks and Romans, down to African theatre and spreading unto the postmodern era. Masks are cultural phenomena in all their material and spiritual particulars and these qualities imbue them with a secondary life. The recorded appearance of masks in the theatre in Greece in the 5th century B.C. underlines the antiquity of masking and its much earlier presence in many unrecorded theatre traditions. The appearances of masks at festivals in many cultures underline their socio-religious functions and significance; such features that have remained largely unchanged in Nigeria's masking tradition.

Ukaegbu (1996) takes a historical trajectory of the mask phenomenon. He reveals that masks were used in Europe in the Middle Ages during the mystery plays of the 12th to the 16th centuries. They were used to delineate diverse characters such as angels, demons, and the seven deadly sins. In the 15th century Renaissance in Italy, they flourished in *commedia dell'arte* but faded in importance in the 18th century until the second half of the 20th century, when experimental theatres gradually resurrected them in European theatre. Masking in Asia includes the highly stylised and rigidly traditional masks of the Noh drama of Japan which Western conventions and aesthetics are yet to penetrate. Though rare in Kabuki, actors still apply their make-up to resemble masks. Masks appear in the highly representative religious and secular dramas of China, where they declare it 'a subtle triumph of art over nature', in the Indian Sanskrit and Ramlila, and in Korean, Tibetan, and Mongolian Shamanism. In the autochthonous homeland of the Amerindians, Java, Bali, and Africa, masks are prominent though their actual theatrical and secular values were only recently recognised. The case of Java, an Islamic state, remains a puzzle since Islam abhors images and statuesque representations. The late recognition of non-European traditional theatres and their purely artistic use of masks were due to the error of early anthropologists in mistaking the Aristotelian concept as the only evidence of a theatrical tradition. Later studies show almost as many theatre traditions as there are people and for these reasons, performance traditions such as Nigerian masking are studied beyond its mere artistic and theatrical forms but within their humorous functional roles in their different socio-cultural setting (Ukaegbu 1996: 173).

Masking is a unique cultural institution that cannot be squeezed into any other model because of its cultural praxis. This is because the differences between theatres arise because of differences in performing conditions, local conventions, the purpose of theatre in the society, and the people's cultural history. Cultural framework and history are the most important of these considerations and make one theatre immensely distinguishable from others.

Igbo masking is familiar to Igbo society from which it evolved and for which it exists. After all, "any artistic form depends upon some readiness in the receiver to co-operate with its aims and conventions" (Sinfield 1983: 185) and "established genre indicates a record of what

has found its place” (Schechner 1983: 90). It depends on Igbo participants and the fact that the often-cited Greek theatre later abandoned its ritual roots does not render it more theatrical than Igbo masking which remains faithful to its roots. The difference is a matter of cultural dialectics, and as Enekwe (1987: 22) points out, “society and history determine the shape that drama takes at any time or place”. Culture and history determine theatre and theatricality and a society determines its dramatic genres, structures, and performative modes. In a study of cultural performances in India, Turner (1986) quotes Milton Singer, whose study appreciates the fact that:

Cultural performances are composed of ‘cultural media’: modes of communication which include not only spoken language, but such non-linguistic media as 'song, dance, acting out, and graphic and plastic arts combined in many ways to express and communicate the content of Indian culture'.
(Turner 1986: 23.)

Masks as cultural signifiers are meaningful within the background of its performance productions. The potential to direct its criticism and poke fun at people are possible in a communal setting where the idioms and metaphor of performance are known and appreciated by the general audience of a particular socio-cultural group. A travelling mask loses its performance meaning outside its cultural domain. This is made clearer by Ottenberg, an American anthropologist who had studied the Okumkpo masquerade of Afikpo people in Ebonyi state, Nigeria. According to him, “the Okumkpo masquerade performance is held together through its close relationship to the people of the community, whose foibles it explores. It is a community theatre, a popular art that is close to the very social and cultural nucleus of the audience” (Ottenberg 1975: 129).

3. Humour and masking art in history

The masking art phenomenon has been subjected to different scholarly interpretations over the years. Some have read it within its functions and roles, including entertainment, others against its aesthetics in mask and costume designs, yet many others have investigated its ritual underpinnings within different socio-cultural backgrounds. This enquiry has set out to draw a parallel investigation between stand-up comedy and masquerade art, in order to establish that, before stand-up acts emerged in Nigeria’s entertainment space as humorous genre, masquerade had been at the vanguard of humorous displays entertaining its audience through its biting criticism and sarcasm. Studies in this area abound: Ottenberg (1975), Ukaegbu (1996), Okoye (2000), Okagbue (2007), etc. This section of the study shall trace the trajectories of masking art through its deployment of humour over different masking cultures in history. In Greek theatre for instance, an attempt at the use of the mask was by Thespis, who as the father of thespian art (theatrical art), deployed it for different role interpretation and delineation of characters. According to Kitto (1960) quoted in Mitchell (1985: 4), “historic accounts hold that Thespis experimented with various kinds of masks before he devised the primitive form for a theatrical convention which would eventually come to symbolise theatre in general and the art of the actor in particular”. “Thespis, so Suidas says, first smeared his face with white lead, then he ‘over-shadowed’ his face with a sprig of purslane [a trailing weed], then he devised a mask of linen”. His linen mask was plain and unpainted. Haigh (1907) in the same work corroborates this position further: “the old comic actors, before the invention of the theatrical mask, used to smear their faces with wine, or cover them with fig leaves, masks were worn in the processions of Dionysus down to the latest times” (Mitchell 1985: 3).

It has been established that the tradition of the mask as a theatrical convention is long, varied, and culturally specific; yet it has spanned the entire history of the Classical theatre,

Renaissance, Modern, and down to the contemporary African times. As a theatrical convention, the mask has developed differently in each of the major periods, although across its history, its primary function has been to convey the image of action, to admonish, criticise, and poke fun at its subjects of caricature. Furthermore, the Greeks, for instance, used exaggerated masks for their emotions or gender attachments, since men played the roles of women. According to Jenkins, male actors would even go as far as wearing fake breasts. The women were often portrayed as extremely sexualised or as the weaker sex in need of a saviour. "Masks brought humour and light to the stage while at the same time holding a spiritual and sacred place in the hearts of the ancient Greeks" (Jenkins 1994: 152). In *commedia dell'arte*, the mask developed further and incorporated men and women for the first time. These were mainly professionals who had mastered certain acts/roles which they could connect with ease, through the use of at least two masks for character delineation and improvisation. According to Bennett (2012:72),

[t]he masks strongly depicted people with exaggerated figures, particularly the nose. The masks of *commedia dell'arte*, usually depicted common social types such as the elderly and men who are filled with a false sense of bravado. Satiric and humorous characters started to develop out of common social types such as Pantalone with the venetian Merchant who is always miserable.

In Noh theatre of Japan also known as *Nogaku*, masks featured prominently, and were in fact used by both male and female to act and sing. The plays are mostly humorous and often composed of smaller plays in one. According to Udaka (2010: 146-148), "the plays and performances are based on old fashioned values and the performances always are based on the original plays, new plays are very seldom written. Noh started to emerge in the 1300s and with it the famous masks recognizable around the world". Masks play a very sacred part in Noh theatre, such that the rarest masks in Japan are kept in prestigious Noh schools and are seldom seen.

From the foregoing, it is clear that each culture defines what is humorous and laughable within their socio-cultural milieu. The implication, therefore, is that what is considered comedic varies from one cultural space to another. Against this backdrop, humans laugh differently depending on what their individual societies consider laughable or offensive. An attempt to rub wine and apply colours to the face in order to create a mask seems humorous to the classical Greeks, just like in *Everyman* (1510), a medieval morality play by an Anonymous author, that has several masks depicting such allegorical characters as Death, Good Deeds, Everyman, Messenger, God, Beauty, Happiness etc. If these characters were to line up, it will definitely arouse humour despite the thematic preoccupation of the play. In the same vein, an exaggerated big nose and men pretending to 'grow' breasts on their chests as women might elicit laughter to the *commedia dell'arte* patrons. Humour is culturally bound and, therefore, as Auslander's (2004: 107) accentuates, comedy "by definition requires certain referents, norms against which behaviours may be deemed humorous".

In Africa, the concept of humour in masking art is well defined, elaborate, and is majorly built into the performance of the masquerade. From a performance perspective, the mask has developed as a means for projecting action and as determined by the context of the performance. That the mask transforms the performer into a new image of his own potential, as asserted by Mitchell (1985), resonates more in the study of Okumkpo, Njenje, Onu Kamma, and Ogbillo masquerade theatres of Afikpo, Abacha, and Idoma by Simon Ottenberg, an American anthropologist, Chukwuma Okoye and Idris Amali, respectively. The Afikpo Okumkpo, performed during the dry season, is rightly described as "Afikpo theatre par excellence" by Ottenberg (1975: 13) who elucidates that "the essence of the play is the direct ridicule and satirising of real persons and topical events, clothed in ritualised and superficially religious terms." (Ottenberg 1975: 129.) Okumkpo "is a medium through which the young and middle-aged adults can air feelings about their elders that they could not otherwise explore

directly in public” as well as “a tension reducing mechanism for traditionalistic and progressive young men and for the elders who are watching the performance, in a social system in which generational conflicts are inherent” (Ottenberg 1975: 135). The political objective of Okumkpo is made clear in the following passage:

The criticisms in the play serve to control the elders’ behaviour, to cut down and level off the tendency of individuals to develop power and to move toward a rank individualism, which is considered destructive to the community.

(Ottenberg 1975: 135.)

The humour characteristics of the masquerade performance “revolves around making fun of persons who are known to the community, or to Afikpo, and in observing their reactions if they are in the audience (Ottenberg 1975: 139). The Okumkpo is a humorous scolding of those who deviate from accepted social roles and norms. During performance, placing the statements in the context of a particular situation and specific individual heightens their interest and humorous effect. It is a form of a morality play concerned with how persons should behave through showing how the same persons had behaved in the past. Amali (1992), who also studied the Ogblo masquerade of his native Idoma had revealed that “the ogblo night mask institution is a rural art of comic origin the premise of which is satire, and the aim of which is to correct” (Amali 1992: 56). As an institution of fierce and vibrant verbal expression, Amali (1992: 56) further explains that “it employs comic sensibilities to satirize by passing ridiculous comments on social ills with the aim of correcting”. In the same vein, Felner & Orenstein (2006: 137) declare that masks in carnivals were combative and used to harpoon colonial authorities and satirize public figures. Performers used masks and anonymity they provided as protective cover for transgressive behaviour displays in carnival skits.

From this point onwards, I shall attempt to investigate humour and stand-up comedy, bearing in mind their interrelationship with the masking tradition under investigation as well as the centrality of the laughable.

4. Humour and stand-up comedy in Nigerian context

This section shall contextualise humour and stand-up comedy variously in Nigeria’s comic environment. Most, if not all, humour scholars, theorists, and researchers tackle the subject from different backgrounds, angles, and perspectives. It is against this backdrop that this enquiry has set out to look at humour from a masking perspective. In African culture, for instance, masquerade not only entertains; it also satirises, criticises, admonishes, verbally attacks and pokes fun at societal misfits who serve as the audience and the village people (where everyone knows everybody), thereby eliciting humour as the central purpose of its performance. Following this position, Carrell (2008: 9) asserts that humour resides with the audience, for nothing is inherently humorous or funny. She believes some joke texts will succeed for one audience and fail to fire for another. To further her argument, she reveals that humour does not exist in a vacuum, but has three necessary constituents which make up the humour event: the joke teller, the joke text, and the audience, all existing within a particular situation which contributes to each of the other three constituents in the humorous event.

In Nigeria, humour and laughter target free minds and those people willing to laugh. On the other, stand-up comedy as social-entertainment enterprise engages groups of individuals, and significantly activates that group experience which is inherent in live theatre where exchange between audience and performer is guaranteed. In Nigeria, according to Nwankwo (2013: 35), “the evolution of stand-up comedy is tied to that of Nollywood (Nigeria film Industry) because both emerged in the early 1990s and since then have grown into multi-

billion naira industry”. It is this allusion to the economic potential of these performance platforms that has necessitated this enquiry. As far back as the history of Africans, masquerade had established itself as a performance medium through which humour was generated, shared, and enjoyed, like stand-up comedy, without recourse to financial attachments. It was a communal affair; the resources for the performance were sourced within the community, it was produced by the community, for the community, and enjoyed (humorously) by the same community. Financial gains were never considered; rather, its humorous and entertainment values were significant. This digression is not without reason as the significance and recognition directed at stand-up comedy are due largely because of its financial viability. Here again I counter Richard Lolu’s position (cited in Nwankwo 2013: 36) that stand-up comedy was not originally an indigenous art form in Nigeria. This view is somewhat faulty since all acts of stand-up comics have been part of the verbal idioms and signifiers of the masquerade, which is an indigenous performance art form. The difference is that stand-up comics are not masked.

Nevertheless, this essay cannot discountenance the enormous achievements of stand-up comedy through which humour and laughter culminating in the phrase describing Nigerians as the “happiest people on earth” has been achieved. There is so much stand-up comedy has achieved in its barely two decades of emergence on the Nigerian performance space. Its major strength has been on the deployment of punch lines and verbal attacks of individuals; the rich, high class ladies, girls, Pentecostal church leaders and men of God, fellow comedians, and Nollywood stars, etc. In a more general sweep, Izuu Nwankwo (2013: 69) presents a historical overview of stand-up comedy in Nigeria as follows:

The year 1990 heralded the beginning of professional stand-up comedy practice in Nigeria. Prior to this time, there was neither cohesion nor coordination amongst performers and performances in the way that it is today. Several events, personalities and institutions have been credited with the rise and subsequent growth of stand-up comedy within the Nigerian entertainment industry.

However, the summary of the very beginnings of stand-up comedy in Nigeria is captured by Ayakoroma (2013: 9), among others:

Opa Williams conceptualised “Nite of a Thousand Laughs”. Consequently, he organised the maiden edition on Sunday, 1st October, 1995, at the University of Lagos, Akoka-Lagos. The event was a success, artistically, but a failure, in terms of financial returns. Despite encountering colossal loss that year, he hung on to the promise of the event, returning in 1996 with some partners. It was yet another huge loss and his partners, understandably, developed cold feet. But Opa was not daunted; though he met several brick-walls in the bid to get sponsors.

Ayakoroma had gone ahead to reveal an encounter Opa Williams had with securing sponsorship. Quoting Okafor, he recounts one of such encounters: “Opa had gone to an electronic company to seek sponsorship, the Indian man asked, you want people to pay to come and laugh? Laugh is free my friend. Ok, come back in five years if you are serious”, he said, practically making a mockery of the idea. Ten years later, this same Indian would see him and say, “My friend, you are a great man. You are a man of great vision”. Although his company does not sponsor events, he gave Opa a N200,000.00 cheque and five television sets (Ayakoroma 2013: 4).

Nigerians now pay yearly pilgrimage to “Nite of a Thousand Laughs” by Opa Williams. In other words, Opa Williams made comedy a veritable serious business venture; he made Nigerians realise they have to pay to laugh; he made comedians realise they have to wear designers’ suits as professionals; and he taught them that comedy can be held in high profile venues and attract high profile fees. He created the comedy industry and set up the factory to

feed the people (Ayakoroma 2013: 10). Although Opa started with the likes of late Mohammed Danjuma, Okey Bakassi, Sam Loco Efe, Boma Erokosima, Late Sammy Needle, Late Junior, and Pretty, his enterprise has since produced many more comedians, a great number of them entertaining millions around the globe. Some within the younger generation, with amiable styles and adaptations to stand-up comedy, include Francis Duru, Yibo Koko, Ayodeji Makun, aka AY, Julius Agwu, Basketmouth, I Go Dye, Bovi, I Go Save, Gandoki, MC Abbey, Gordons, Michael Ogbolosingha, Klint de Drunk, MC Basketmouth, Teju Baby Face, Maleke, Holly Mallam, Elenu, MC Shakara, Onyebuchi Ojieh (Buchi), Emeka Smith, Dave Sikpa, Princess, and Lepacious Bose, among others. Glo, the Nigerian telecommunications giant, has some of them, such as Basket Mouth, as its ambassadors. The context, content, and presentation style of these stand-up comedians are almost the same. The borderline for stand-up comedy is humour, meaning that most of what the comedian does on stage is to induce laughter. To this point, Nwankwo (2013: 111) opines that “humour can only be generated by certain referrals which may or may not be stated in the joke. Such referrals are often part of the common cultural background which the performer shares with the audience”.

The components of the stand-up comic performances include verbal skits created out and around the following; politics, religion, socio-cultural lifestyles including heterosexuality, ethnicity, and general bureaucratic verbiages. Every stand-up comic in Nigeria starts his act using himself first as subject and object of criticism. This is in a bid to sway the audience to himself. Politics is a common theme on their performance stage, where critical commentaries on socio-political issues raised are punchy and laughable. Different stand-up comics have made humorous remarks about Olusegun Obasanjo, the former president, about his looks and how tight-fisted he is with money. For instance, Kint da Drunk, one of the most notable comedians in Nigeria, had parodied and satirised the former president as a gorilla with a bunch of bananas, when it comes to parting with money. The audience visualising the president and his antecedent with money laughs out loud at such allusion. Instances of criticism of government policies can be seen in the stage renditions of some comedians. Basket Mouth, for instance, once talked about the economic hardship on the citizens, stating how parents have to send their school drop-out children to hawk wares in order to make ends meet in the face of government’s insensitivity to the plight of its citizenry. No incumbent president has been so thoroughly satirised as Olusegun Obasanjo. In one of such humorous verbal snipes, Nwankwo (2013: 116) talks about I Go Die, one of the comics, and how he parodied the late wife of ex-president Olusegun Obasanjo:

When you look at Nigeria today, one observes that there is ban on the import of some goods. They have banned importation of cars, frozen turkey, second-hand clothes... I wonder how poor people can afford new dresses. It’s because of this that Stella met the president and said: “Oby, now that you are banning everything, do not ban ‘pancake’ too”. I am only joking.

The joke, according to Nwankwo, has a number of allusions, chief of which is that Stella Obasanjo is known to be a heavy user of cosmetics, especially “pancakes”, or facial concealers/foundation.

In a more holistic approach, a good number of popular Nigerian stand-up acts like AY, Gordon, Ali Baba, I go Die, Basket Mouth, Julius Agwu direct their cynical, satirical, sarcastic, and laughable comments at politicians and governance, the Clergy and the institution of the church, university girls, and grade sorting dispositions, security personnel especially the police and checkpoint corruption. Ayakoroma (2013:16, cited in Onyerionwu 2010: 8) concludes that

all of the foregoing are demonstrations of the role artists play as the voices of reason in a society in dire need of direction. Furthermore, it is understandable that being involved in the art of entertainment, stand-up comedians source materials from every imaginable aspect of Nigerian life,

and dissecting them “with a knife dipped in the light-hearted fluid of comedy” and the instructional import of its assertions never escapes the alert mind of the sensitive Nigerian.

It is against this background that this paper affirms that comedy thrives on sensationalism, distortions of mannerisms, ambiguities, incongruities, absurdities, grotesque presentations, and misrepresentations; and not forgetting exaggerations and litotes. Based on these, Nigeria’s stand-up comedy explores subjects and scenarios that are real and topical to the people. Most of the times, the stand-up acts generate ideas while on stage using the audience as fill ups. This enhances the intimacy enjoyed by the comedians and the audience alike. The humour which comes off this on-the-spot reaction endears the teeming audience to the venues of these events.

5. Humour and masking art in Nigerian context

This section will concentrate wholly on the activities of the masquerade in selected regions of Nigeria: Idoma (Benue), Igbo (Ebonyi, Enugu, and Anambra), Efik (Cross River) and Ibibio (Akwa Ibom) that generate humour through ridicule and sarcasm. Whether as an item of costume or as embodied, the masking art in Africa generally is viewed as a humorous phenomenon which represents the diversity of the people’s socio-cultural lifestyles. As earlier pointed out, humour is culture-selective and culture is enlivened through performance. The mask has long been a symbol of the theatre; its iconic function can be traced to its traditional developments as a variety of conventions for the projection of action which is shared between the audience within the spatiality of performance.

The action in the performance of the masquerade is attributable to a duality of self. That which it is, and the other which it represents. It is within the representation that mimicry, mimesis, and the use of the mask as object and metaphor of disguise to achieve humour is accentuated and its effect on the audience heightened. Humour and laughter are akin to masquerade performance in African societies. It is varied and generally deployed in skits, impersonation, role-play, dancing, singing, movements, and in its guttural poetic chants, which ensures that the secrecy of the masked and costumed persona becomes a mechanism for revealing events and happenings in the society albeit humorously without any form of indictment, resentment, and challenge from those whose misdemeanours are revealed before the general public. The aesthetics and metaphor of the mask as potential for humour generation is revealed in Okoye’s (2013) “The Body of my Friend...”. According to him,

the singing and dancing masquerade, Onu Kamma (“the mouth is greater [cuts sharper] than the knife”), is a group of masquerades in Abacha, which are adept at singing satirical songs and naming perpetrators of evil or social misdemeanours. They often punctuate their singing and dancing with the sung injunction, “onye mu kọọlu ọnu nya atana mmọ” (...) bute Udo bute Ogwugwu ka m ñulu na m bukwa mmọ” (“whomever I satirise must not betray the masquerade [...] bring the gods Udo and Ogwugwu and I’ll swear [by them] that I am an ancestral spirit”).

(Okoye 2013: 10.)

Okoye presupposes that the personal identities of these masquerades are already known to the audience but still they are reminded to play ignorance of the fact. This approach is necessary to avoid a clash between those who served as the butts of the masquerades’ satirical songs and skits, and may feel offended. This goes to corroborate the stand-up comics’ appeal about “I’m only joking” after a punch line of humorous delivery which they feel is offensive. In the instance of the masquerade, before, during, and after the performance, measures are taken to ensure and insure the maskers from external forces like the use of talisman against them.

Like the stand-up comics who direct their satirical and critical commentaries at real persons and institutions of the government, the masquerade, as a stinger, has over the years employed raking, eavesdropping, spying, and stalking the villagers that make up its audience as resources for its acts. Ottenberg's (2006) suggestion regarding this position is necessary at this point. In his own words, "up to a hundred or more masked players play in the village common before an audience of men, women, and children, dancing, singing, and acting out a series of satirical and topical skits that are critical commentaries on the lives and affairs real persons" (Ottenberg 2006: 46). Masquerades in the villages present themselves as social critics and humourists, who operate within a belief system of the people and surrounded by secrecy and supernaturalism made possible by their costumes and masks and their associations with secret societies.

The variety of topics or themes covered in the Okumkpo masquerade performance discussed by Ottenberg (2006) is quite wide and not limited to the following ones. These highlights can only be meaningfully humorous to those who understand what humour is within the socio-cultural milieu of Afikpo. The skits are based on facts that are partially or fully known to members of the audience. For this reason, some actions are not fully explained or developed in song and role play, and therefore maximum enjoyment of the play depends upon some knowledge of the events being depicted. Here, according to Ottenberg (1975) and verified by the researcher as a native of Afikpo, are the most current and topical issues satirised by the Okumkpo masquerade:

Man who returns home poor after spending many years from a distant journey and sells his father's only piece of land.

Man who becomes drunk at a chieftaincy title ceremony and defecates in his pants.

Henpecked men, who allow his wife to rule over him and truncate the sex role in Afikpo.

Man who is stingy in marriage and with his mother-in-law.

Men who die young because they bring in foreign medicines and do not know how to control them properly.

Women who cook and do not give their husbands

Women who want to know the secret of the men's secret cult and for that are unable to conceive and bear children.

Men who are corrupt and bribe takers in matters concerning land disputes.

(Ottenberg 1975: 129, my emphasis.)

From the aesthetic viewpoint, the major element is humour. Humour is central to the performance: the quality of songs and the acts is judged largely by their humorous content. In general, if they are not funny, they are not liked very much by the audience. The humour is direct and the emphasis is on satire and ridicule. Humour, however, according to Ottenberg (1975: 29), revolves around making fun of persons who are known to the community, or to Afikpo. Amali (1992: 60) suggests that humour can be generated using foul and more forceful approaches like insults. He noted that among the many functions of his native Ogblllo masquerade, lies its ability to insult in lucid and artistically expressive language using all its verbal matrix to arouse laughter. The verbal attacks of Ogblllo bite deep into human realities. It targets immoral acts: adultery, theft, vanity, garrulity, greed, quarrels, prostitution, and other behaviours that are not in line with the people's way of life. It is often said that, if Ogblllo insults a woman, she would go and hang (Amali 1992: 61). The mask as an object alone can generate a lot of laughter. Its physiognomy can be as grotesque as it can be an ingenuous abstract creation of the artist's imagination. In these instances, the overriding significance is to elicit laughter. Further to this, with skits of impersonation, characterisation, and dramatic actions coming from the masked performers, the whole scenario and ambiance are charged with laughter as witnessed in the venues of the emergent stand-up acts. From the foregoing,

masks and maskers from time past have been deployed by societies as means of relaxation and entertainment even when criticising and conscientising individuals about the need for an ideal society. In fact, this is an afterthought to the function of the mask in primitive societies. The earlier point is to make sure that the townspeople who are gathered in communal festivity use such celebration to mark one season or another as part of the cultural needs of the people.

6. Conclusion

Judging from the submissions of this essay about the performance mechanics of the masquerade and the stand-up comics in terms of humour and satire, the maskers/comics speak with authority. This is derived from the secret society (of the masquerades) and freedom of speech guaranteed by human rights and the constitution (in the case of the comedians). The mask and costume, the theatrical nature of their acts, and the belief that they are a type of spirit and untouchables all serve to protect and ensure freedom of performance. These elements of make-believe act as a screen, allowing masquerades/comedians, who are viewed as somewhat foolish persons, to act out the quality in the performance including the revelation of secrets about known individuals in society. Through songs, dance, music, metaphoric, and symbolic dialogue, mask performers engage in relationships and encounters that go beyond performances; such relationships mirror the bigger world. Mask, humour, satire, and the occasional use of actual names and scenarios elevate the performer-audience relationship to an exercise in self-exorcism and group therapy. The audience engage in the therapy by using the lessons from skits and other stage acts to secure a community's socio-religious harmony. Humour and satire as the end products of some of the identified masked performances encourage communities and individuals to laugh at themselves without impairing their sense of judgment, criticism, and censure.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the masquerade had served as a means through which humour was generated, shared, and enjoyed in the past. Furthermore, the present analysis has established situations, actions, attitudes, scenarios, impersonations, role-play, of real individuals and government's institutions as subjects of the masquerade's caricature and sarcasm aiming at contributing to a better society. Their approach is critical, satirical, and humorous, but the result is serving the audience a dose of the realities staring at them. This echoes louder in the words of Bamidele (2001: 7), "it is in comedy as art more than tragedy that man is exposed for what he is". Quoting *The Provoked Wife* (1697) by Vanbrugh, Bamidele (2001: 7) concludes as follows:

It is the business of the stage
To copy out the follies of the age
To hold to everyman a faithful glass
And show man of what species he is, an ass.

The masquerade as described in this study exhibits all the attributes of stand-up comics and more, yet it has never been considered for an academic enquiry within the premise of humour generation like stand-up comics now enjoy. There are no innovations that one can intensely ascribe to stand-up comics that are missing in the acts of the masquerade. Stand-up comics use the audience and government agencies as the butt of their sarcasm, the masquerade targets the townspeople (i.e. its audience), they are protected for lawsuits from the public when offended especially using their hashtag "uncensored". Masquerade had enjoyed and is continuously enjoying such immunity until date. The stand-up comics enjoy large patronage through ticketing, masquerade has the villagers who throng the village square, market square or the king's compound. Both performances are delivered through words, music, dance, mime,

and acrobatics. There is immediacy and liveliness in both performances. There is also action and reaction leading to audience-performer relationships. However, masquerade, like all traditional performance, forms is a communal affair and everybody is a contributor and there's no need for ticketing and being boxed in a corner to peep at one's show as Wole Soyinka (Africa's first laureate) would say. Masquerade's prominence may have been overshadowed by lack of financial prospects and the near extinction of traditional performance forms. This is the difference between stand-up comics and the masquerade, as the former enjoys monetary rewards and endorsements from multi-national corporations as brand ambassadors, the masquerade is not known and will never be known, but the humorousness of its arts and acts linger in the hearts of its audience: the village people, despite the historical-cum-academic obscurity.

References

- Abrams, H.M. (1981). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. London: Holt, Reinhart and Wiston Ltd.
- Amali, I. (1992). 'Indigenous Nigerian oral drama as an instrument of social regulation: a study of Ogbello secret society of Idoma'. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 20 (1), pp. 56-67.
- Ayakoroma, B. (2013). 'The rise of stand-up comedy genre in Nigeria: from nothing to something in artistic entertainment'. A paper delivered at the society of Nigeria theatre artists (SONTA) annual conference with the theme, "Quality assurance: theatre, drama & film" at Benue State University, Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria, from 4-8, June.
- Bamidele, O. L. (2001). *Comedy: Essays and Studies*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers (Nig.) Ltd.
- Barnet, S., Berman M. & Burton W. (eds.) (1972). *Type of Drama, Plays and Essays*. Boston: Little Brown and Boston.
- Bennett, M. (2012). 'The mask of commedia dell'arte, Noh theatre and classical Greece: The Cultural Meanings, Influence and Similarities'. <www.spark.parkland.edu/ah/72> [Accessed on 6th October, 2017.]
- Bergson, H. (1911). *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. (Translated) Paris: Temple of Earth Publishing.
- Carrel, A. (2008). 'Historical views of humour', in Raskin, V. (ed.), *The Primer of Humour*, Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 303-332.
- Encyclopedia Britannica online: www.britannica.com/art/mask-face-covering/the-functions-and-forms/of. [Accessed on 24th September, 2017.]
- Enekwe, O. (1987). *Igbo Masks: The Oneness of Ritual and Theatre*. Lagos: Nigeria Magazine
- Felner, M. and Orenstein, C. (2006). *The World of Theatre: Tradition and Innovation*. New York: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Gifford, P. (1981). 'Humour and the French mind: towards a reciprocal definition'. *Modern Language Review*. 76.3, pp. 534-548.
- Haigh, A. E. (1907). *The Attic Theatre*. 3d ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jenkins, I. (1994). 'Face value: the mask in Greece and Rome'. In Mack, J. (ed.), *Mask and the Art of Expression*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., pp. 150-168.
- Kitto, H. D. F. (1960). *Form and Meaning in Drama*. New York: Barnes and Noble.
- Knuuttila, S. (2010). 'How humour makes a difference.' *Folklore* 46, pp. 33-42.
- Mechlem, C. (2008). 'The uses of humour: where being funny is a serious thing'. <http://usesofhumor.blogspot.com.ng/2008/10/bergson-and-relation-to-humor.html>. [Accessed on 30th November, 2018.]
- Mercier, V. (1969). *The Irish Comic Tradition*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Mitchell, M. A. (1985). 'The development of the mask as a critical tool for an examination of character and performer action'. Dissertation. Texas Tech University.
- Moody, B. (1968). *Literary Appreciation: A Practical Guide to the Understanding and Enforcement of Literature in English*. London: Longmans Group Ltd.
- Nwankwo, I. (2013). 'Stand-up comedy as a new form of live theatre in Nigeria'. Dissertation. University of Ibadan.
- Obadare, E. (2009). 'The use of ridicule: Humour, "infrapolitics" and civil society in Nigeria'. *African Arts*, 108/431, pp. 241-261.
- Ododo, S. E. (2001). 'Theatrical aesthetics and functional values of Ekuechi masquerade ensemble of the Ebira people in Nigeria'. *Africa Monograph*. 22 (1), pp. 1-36.
- Okoye, C. (2013). "'The body of my friend": liminal presence in Igbo masquerade theatre'. *AMA: Journal of Theatre and Cultural Studies*, 8 (1), pp. 1-17.
- Onyerionwu, E. (2013). 'Stand up comedy as a pop art'. *Vanguard News Nigeria*, 19 May 2013. <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2010/05/stand-up-comedy-as-a-pop-art/>. [Accessed on 30th November, 2018.]
- Ottenberg, S. (1975). *The Masked Rituals of Afikpo: The Context of an African Art*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Ottenberg, S. (2006). 'Humorous masks and serious politics among Afikpo Ibo', in Falola, T. (ed.), *Igbo Arts and Culture and Other Essays by Simon Ottenberg*, Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, Inc.
- Schechner, R. (1988). *Performance Theory*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Sinfield, Alan (1983) (ed.) *Society and Literature 1945-1970*. London: Methuen.
- Turner, V. (1986). *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications.
- Udaka, M. (2010). *The Secrets of Noh Masks*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd.
- Ukaegbu, V. (1996). 'The composite scene: the aesthetics of Igbo mask theatre'. Dissertation. University of Plymouth.
- Vanbrugh, J. (1697). *The Provoked Wife*. (No publisher's details.)
- Wilson, E. (2001). *The Theatre Experience*. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc..