

ALI BABA: TWENTY YEARS OF STAND-UP COMEDY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The paper is a celebrative essay in connection with twenty years of Ali Baba's trailblazing efforts at establishing stand-up comedy as a popular art on the modern Nigerian stage. Tracing the antecedents of the comic art in the Nigerian theatre, the paper recalls the earlier efforts of reputable comedians such as Moses Olaiya of the Alawada ('Baba Sala') fame in the immediate post-independence period, and historicises the significant contributions of popular disc jockeys and masters of ceremonies whose previous rib-cracking exploits helped to nurture theatrical comedy in the Nigerian scene. With a focus on the case study, the paper examines the transition from amateurism to professionalism in the evolving art of stand-up comedy and the pioneering ("Open Sesame!") role of Alleluya Atuyota Akporobomere, better known as Ali Baba, to this ongoing trend. While acknowledging the future prospects of this comic art, the paper highlights the need for effective unionisation to offset a possible glut that could be created by the uncontrolled influx of comic hacks, resulting in a lowering of standards and a consequent decline in profitability. The paper ends on a note of tribute to Ali Baba for whom it is not yet "Shut Sesame!" in regard to his remarkable exploits on the Nigerian comic scene.

Key words: Comedy, Stand-Up Comedy, Ali Baba, Popular art, Nigerian Theatre.

Introduction

The saga of Ali Baba and the forty thieves is well known. It tells of the fictional hero of a medieval Arabian tale, who ran into stupendous wealth in his deadly encounters with the forty thieves. This resulted into the magic phrase, "Open Sesame!" which Ali Baba learnt from the forty thieves, and which gave him access to the enormous wealth that he and

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his subsequent generations later inherited. Our own Ali Baba, the focus of this piece, is different. He is not known to have had an encounter with any group of thieves, and the only things he is known to 'steal' are the hearts of members of his appreciative audience, who are made to explode into peals of roaring laughter, by his rib-cracking jokes and humorous antics. But, like the Ali Baba of the saga, he seems to have found the magic formula with which he was able to access the secret of stand-up comedy in Nigeria – some twenty odd years ago, when the idea of a full-time professional comedian in this country was both foolhardy and absolutely unimaginable. Hence, this piece attempts to explore the "Open Sesame!" with which our own Ali Baba has unlocked the secret of stand-up comedy in Nigeria.

His full name – Alleluya Atuyota Akporobomeriere – evokes comic reaction by the length of his surname, particularly among those from outside his Urhobo clan in Delta State. The middle name, Atuyota, literally means 'one who speaks the truth', a most apposite appellation for a stand-up comedian of his stature. After all, comedy is all about telling the bitter truth in a sweetened manner, presenting the sugar-coated pill in a pleasant way. Comedy is not just about trivial issues, or the avoidance of serious issues; rather, it is the adoption of an apparently trivial approach to serious issues, thus making light of obviously ponderous and weighty matters. In the words of Oscar Wilde, author of the all-time classic, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the lesson of comedy is to take the so-called trivial issues with earnestness, and to treat serious issues with studied triviality. Writing in the same vein, Walter Kerr says that 'comedy is not a relief, it is the rest of the bitter truth, a holy impropriety' (Kerr, 1968:28). And so, over the past two decades, Atuyota, alias 'Ali Baba', has courageously spoken the bitter truth to the high and the low, to the leadership and the followership, such that erstwhile President Olusegun Obasanjo reportedly took personal

delight in his satirical jibes, even when he was obviously the butt of the ridicule.

Comedy: A Brief Overview

Comedy has had a long, chequered run, from the time of Aristophanes in Classical Greece, to the modern times. Against the more robust tradition of tragedy, comedy had a lowly start, and was initially rated as the inferior cousin of tragedy. Hence, Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, observes that while tragedy portrays men better than they are in real life, comedy portrays them as worse, which is all the more reason why the audience is able to laugh at the follies and foibles of the comic hero. However, the creative exploits of great comedians like Molière and Ben Jonson, have reversed the status of comedy, which now puts it on an equal pedestal with tragedy. Indeed, comedy, at its best, is a more complex and more involving art than tragedy, because it is much easier to inflict pain than to produce true pleasure. While crying is a natural and mandatory emotion exercised at the cradle, laughing is a habit that a child has to acquire later in life largely through the deft, skilful touch of mothering. Great tragedies are products of great artistry; but successful comedies are products of skilled craftsmanship.

In Nigeria, Moses Olaiya Adejumo (popularly known as Baba Sala) blazed the comic trail, preparing the ground for the later emergence of Ali Baba, who planted stand-up comedy on the compost heap of popular entertainment. The acclaimed 'father of modern Nigerian comedy', Moses Olaiya came into the limelight in the early 1960s, in the immediate post-independence period, contemporaneous with the maturation of the Yoruba Travelling Theatre of Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Oyin Adejobi, Kola Ogunmola and others, who also popularised television drama in the country. In those heady days of acquired sovereignty, Moses Adejumo regaled the Yoruba audience with hilarious farces, in a mixed atmosphere of lingering despair and qualified optimism. The stock comic hero he created in Baba Sala, a peculiar combination of the wily fool and the foolish knave, endeared himself to

all and sundry, as the model of popular comic archetype, replicated by later comedians in such outlandish characters as Baba Suwe, Baba Mero, and others.

Comedy ranges widely in scope and intent – from the profound and elevating to the hollow and broadly farcical; from the intensely satirical to the playfully genial; from the high and singular to the low and popular. Humour and laughter are its central weapons, deployed in accordance with the nature and texture of its broad varieties. However, stand-up comedy derives essentially from the inalienable risibility of the low and the farcical, sharing with the latter the broad objective of evoking rich, vibrant laughter. It has to be stressed that laughter is not always the goal of high comedy which communicates essentially through clever witticism and the subtlety of language. Complicated plotting and complex characterisation are its additional hallmarks. But not so with farce. If the farceur fails in his sole objective of evoking laughter, he fails as an artist in much the same way as a stand-up comedian whose joke is greeted with an embarrassing silence becomes desperate to regain credibility and restore communication – or quit the scene.

On Laughter, Wit and Humour

The *raison d'être* of the stand-up comedian is to give the audience valid reasons to laugh and relieve pent-up feelings. True laughter is an involuntary psychological reaction which individuals undertake – in spite of themselves. Medical experts and psychologists have explored the relationship between laughter and healthy living. According to an Internet source, a positive link between laughter and the healthy functioning of blood vessels was first reported in 2005 by researchers at the University of Maryland Medical Centre, who established that laughter causes the inner lining of blood vessels; the *endothelium*, to dilate or expand, thus increasing blood flow and maximising the

functioning of the various vital organs (*Wikipedia*). Psychologically speaking, laughter results in the total relaxation of the veins and muscles, leading to a general feeling of relief, which also emanates from the relaxation of the brain itself. Over time, this has an unquantifiable capacity of prolonging the life of the individual. Laughter is thus of particular use in moments of depression, which explains why the stand-up comedian is ever so popular during the periods of hardship imposed by bad governance, as currently being witnessed in Nigeria. At such times, laughter-inducing comedy is a welcome and desirable diversion. Smiling is closely related to laughter. It can be defined as the root or index of laughter, and a demonstration of goodwill and genial social relationship. A smile or a chuckle is evidence that laughter is just around the corner, radiating love and affection.

Similarly, humour is an inalienable feature of comedy, and the most important weapon in the arsenal of the stand-up comedian. Combined with wit, humour has the infinite capacity to provoke spontaneous comic reactions in individuals. However, as Lanre Bamidele (2001:46) submits, 'humour in itself cannot be characterised as being generally applicable, for what is humorous to one might be tragic to another.' In spite of their close relationship, humour is very different from wit, in the sense that while the former is basically natural, the latter is fundamentally intellectual. Witticism relates to the capacity at the clever manipulation of language through pun, verbal irony, parody, sarcasm, axiom, aphorism, clever repartees and intelligent periphrasis. To have a sense of humour implies having a natural endowment to create or appreciate jokes, funny remarks or anecdotes, often within specific social or cultural contexts, while to be witty means to be clever and intelligent in the largely intellectual sense. Some of the variable factors affecting humour are culture, educational background, personal intelligence, emotional maturity and social context. Hence, a comedian has necessarily to relate his or her jokes to the psycho-intellectual make-up of the target audience. Humour is closely related to laughter as laughter's inducing agent, with the brain serving as the production

factory. Ridicule, incongruity and the unexpected are the principal weapons of comedy. Rowan Atkinson, one of the contemporary comic artists, more popularly known as Mr Bean, elucidates on the incongruity theory by identifying three ways by which this can be brought about, viz: by behaving in an unusual way, by being in an unusual place or by being the wrong or unusual size, expressed mostly through sight gags, with little or no articulate speech (*Wikipedia*).

Stand-Up Comedy: A peep into history

The history of stand-up comedy is traceable to the music halls of the 18th and 19th centuries in the United Kingdom, producing such notable performers as Arthur Askey and Max Miller. Similarly, traditions of popular entertainments in the 19th century, including vaudeville, provided the fertile ground for the development and growth of the American stand-up comedy. *Wikipedia Encyclopedia* identifies Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Fred Allen, Milton Berle and Frank Fay as the founding fathers. In all places where stand-up comedy has developed, it was often preceded by a vibrant tradition of disc jockeying and events anchoring involving a talented individual capable of thrilling the audience for hours on end, and keeping boredom in check. In the United States, for instance, Frank Fay reportedly gained acclaim as a "master of ceremonies" at New York's Palace Theater and was credited with creating the style of 20th century stand-up (*Wikipedia*).

Stand-Up Comedy: From amateurism to professionalism

Ali Baba, the celebrated pioneer of modern stand-up comedy in Nigeria, acknowledges some of the pioneers in the comedy show who cleared the way for him. In an interview on 13th May, 2011, with Segun Ogundipe, alias 'Laff-Up', one of his much younger mentorees, this graduate of Ambrose Ali University (formerly Bendel State University), Ekpoma,

specifically paid tribute to the pioneering efforts of such outstanding comedians as Baba Sala, Pappy Luwe, Jaguar and others. He is quoted thus:

...There were people doing comedy before me. I always doff my hat for the likes of Baba Sala, Pappy Luwe, Jaguar and a lot of them...Thus, I respect them; they were the pioneers. I only came to improve on what was on ground; that is the task of this age...

But Ali Baba claims the singular honour of transforming comedy from mere show into proper business with all the financial professionalism and administrative protocols that go with it. Thus, unlike his older precursors in the art who were content to anchor events for peanuts, Ali Baba proudly ranks himself high and his initial token of about N150 per show, during his school days, rose steadily to a professional fee of N1.6 million naira for a single show, especially for official state functions (Ogundipe, 2011:52-54).

This emphasis on professionalism and high profile image was the thrust of his address to the audience at the Arts Theatre, University of Ibadan, during an earlier special seminar on Friday, 23rd July, 2010, to mark his 20th Anniversary of professional practice. The previous day, Thursday, 22nd July, he had regaled a mammoth crowd of enthusiastic patrons and admirers with rib-cracking jokes at the Trenchard Hall of the university till close to midnight as part of the landmark anniversary which also marked the coming of age of stand-up comedy in Nigeria. Today, there is a wide array of stand-up comedians in Nigeria, each with a distinctive style of performance, thematic focus and manner of communication. The frontrunners behind Ali Baba include Basket Mouth, Klint de Drunk, Gordons, AY, I Go Die, Gbenga Adeyinka, Opa

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Williams, Teju Baby Face, and so on. However, there is disconcerting evidence that mediocrity has begun to creep in on the part of many of the new entrants who lack adequate formal education and intellectual prowess to cope with the demands of this solo personality comedy. In the absence of effective unionisation and proper regulation of professional practice, the comedy industry faces the prospects of a glut which, if left unchecked, may lead to a lowering of standards and declining profitability. However, it is hoped that this unhealthy trend should sort itself out over time as the chaff ultimately gets separated from the grains. Comedy, the task of making people laugh in spite of their tragic conditions, indeed in spite of their ill-disposition to laugh, is serious business, which deserves all the seriousness it can muster and the stand-up comedian must constantly renew and repackage his or her art for effective delivery. Unlike a musical composition which is capable of retaining its melodious freshness over a considerably long period of time, jokes and hilarious anecdotes by stand-up comedians have relatively shorter life-spans and need to be replaced or repackaged from time to time. Stand-up comedy thus has a distinct business angle which should not be sacrificed on the altar of sheer pleasure or entertainment. Ever since his discovery of the "Open Sesame" of stand-up comedy in Nigeria, Ali Baba's dynamism has given his art an enduring freshness over two full decades without going stale, and without any signs of exhaustion. It would be a long while yet before we can proclaim "Shut Sesame!" to his remarkable achievements in the Nigerian comic scene.

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