

Book Review

Ignatius Chukwumah (ed.), *Joke-Performance in Africa: Mode, Media and Meaning*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. 290 pp. ISBN: 9781-1-138-06064-7 (hbk), Price: £125.00.

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The comic performance has remained one of the oldest dramatic genres in theatre history, yet it is relatively under-researched by scholars of African theatre and performance. *Joke-Performance in Africa: Mode, Media and Meaning* is an important contribution to the understanding of the psychology of humour and by extension, Africa through her comic performative praxis. The book has a five-part structure comprising fourteen chapters preceded by a general introduction. The contributors are drawn from different countries in Africa with representations from the East, West, North and Southern regions of the continent.

In the introduction, Ignatius Chukwumah provides a conceptual backdrop to the typology of joke-performance in Africa and its variants and trajectories. He conceives joke as popular cultural art, a “verbal form” which is folk-based and a “codified expression” touching on hilarity and thus a genre of humour (p.2). Hence, in traditional Africa, jokes are interwoven with the social existence of everyday interactions, consequently jokes have to be “performatively rendered” and “accessed in the immediacy of verbalisation and rendered by an individual qualifying as the joke-performer” (p.2). In essence, the performance of jokes is an “outward demonstration” or mode of “acting out a probable action in verbal art...” (p.3). Chukwumah further observes that jokes and joke-performance are in a state of flux and its assessment continues to vary in time. Thus, the use of new media or ultra-modern media platforms precipitated the fragmentation of the character of joke-performances. Therefore, notwithstanding where today’s joke-performance is accessed from, its cast, audience profile and narrative form, the binding agent and dis-

tinguishing factor are the ultra-modern media. Nonetheless, Chukwumah contends that joke-performance in Africa goes beyond mere amusement because it contains a moralistic dimension, either as satire against misdemeanours or deterrent to antisocial behaviour. To capture the diverse trajectories, mutations and metamorphosis of joke-performance in contemporary Africa, the book is divided into parts, each dealing with specific thematic, stylistic or conceptual preoccupation.

Part I focuses on “joking about government” and features three essays that reflect the comic attacks on the postcolonial African State which has become a frequent target of comedians. Remmy Barasa’s essay examines *The XYZ Show* in Kenya as a joke-cartoon that reflects on politics using latex characters and manipulation of language as humorous devices to amuse the audience and satirise the foibles of political actors in the country. Barasa argues that joke-cartoons are effective in pricking wayward politicians, offering “new insights into the political character” in Kenya thereby becoming a mode for “(re) imagining the polity”. Barasa analysed eight episodes of *The XYZ Show* which plots revolve around the vicissitudes of President Uhuru Kenyatta, his Deputy, William Ruto and opposition leader, Raila Odinga and concluded that puppet characters present a refreshing narrative and makes comic statements about the African experience of governance in a post colony. Keeping with political comic representations theme, Chukwumah discusses the trend of “comicast” performance in Nigeria. The “comicast” is a contrived phrase that refers to comic broadcasts built around real or imagined events with the intent to lampoon the characters involved, cause laughter and deliver political satires. The form has “its roots in the electronic media” and amply facilitated by materials from social media and the Internet. It uses either human or cartoon characters to explore various themes and these are later published online. The chapter thus focuses on the use of “comicast” genre to poke fun about real or imagined events surrounding Nigeria’s 2015 elections and post-election matters featuring President Buhari, Ex-President Jonathan, the First Ladies and others. The ribald attacks are generally directed at politicians and the genre shows not only the comic potentials and hybridity of the digital media, but also illustrates the Internet as a performance space, “a utopian theatre ... in which millions of people interact with a certain dramatic intensity” (p.41). Another example of joking about African governments is from Morocco where Zakarine Bouhmala examines a Moroccan comic series titled *The School of the Naughty* that depicts political themes “symptomatic of the democratic progress” the country is experiencing. Using cartoon characters, the series dramatises a comical situation where the monarchy seems to share power with the politicians as reflected in the personification of Abdelilah Ben-

kirane, the Moroccan Head of Government and other cabinet ministers whose weaknesses and scandalous history are re-enacted and animated with comic effect.

Part II of the book deals with the traditional forms and (post)modern contexts of joke-performance. In this section, Peter Omoko discusses the dynamics of art and humour among the Urhobo ethnic group in Nigeria. Using the indigenous phrase "*ehwe-eje*" which means, "cracking jokes" as a discursive platform, Omoko traces the roots and tentacles of joke-performance among the Urhobo, from oral tradition to contemporary art and digital media. He explains that the impact of the Urhobo joke-performance is mainly dependent on the linguistic processes, artistic abilities and special charm of the orator (joke-performer). Relying on anecdotes, proverbs, aphorisms, cultural idioms and traditional wisdom, the Urhobo joke-performer, as illustrated with two artists, succeeds in amusing the audience while "reflecting on the poor socio-economic status of the Nigerian masses" (p.84). In the next essay, Smith Likongwe explores the videos of Anganga Afiki as a joke-performance in Malawi. Being a popular video comedian, Hussein Gopole (whose stage name is Anganga Afiki) relies on the principles of incongruity and superiority to create comical scenes and interactions that keep his video-viewing audiences entertained and enlightened about their social realities. From the perspective of the Tiv in Nigeria, Godwin Ikyer's contribution examines the paradox of friendly enemy (the Tiv-Fulani affair) through satire. Using "the cultural context and localized experiences of the Tiv people", Ikyer's chapter discusses comedy in Tiv indigenous worldview. This is illustrated in the theatre of Sammy Willas (also known as Sule) whose joke-performances reflect the "new trends and excesses of the Tiv society" even as performance of jokes undergoes shifts in texts and contexts due to "cross-cultural experiences" caused by "urbanization and postmodern values" (p.114). To round off the section on traditional joke-performance, Sebastian Gadomski's chapter analyses the evolution and character of Egyptian satire in the media age. He traces Egyptian satire in Arabic from the folk culture and shadow theatres of old, to the contemporary satire dominated by the styles of individual artists. This has been revolutionised by the proliferation of the Internet in Egypt, thereby providing a wider space for disseminating humorous communication in different forms to the public. This is exemplified in Bassem Youssef's popular TV programme, *Al-Barnamig*, a "mega-genre created from a collage of performances" which goes beyond the conventional practices of Egyptian satire by privileging satire and laughter as "multi-layered", "polyphonic" and instruments of socio-political debate.

Part III focuses on street jokes with contributions from Kenya and

Egypt. In the Kenyan contributions, Mwai, Kebaya and Kimongo interrogate the joke-performance of “Mchongoano”, an urban youth joke genre. The performance is built around the esoteric and peculiar manipulation of language to execute a “verbal duel of jokes” with insulting undertones. Beyond entertainment, Mchongoano has become a contextualised expression of urban youth culture reflective of social realities in Kenya. This joke-genre has permeated the electronic media space and is exhibited on TV, FM radio, and online platforms. Similarly, Heba Sharobeem analyses the street performances of two Egyptian joke-performance troupes, Halah and Outa Hamra. Building on the old tradition of “Aragoz” puppet shows, noted for their sarcasm and humorous caricatures, Halah and Outa Hamra dish out popular street humour that could be considered empowering and liberating among its target underprivileged and marginalised audience. Using eclectic approaches involving costume, clowning, language, dramatic action, song and music, these carnivalesque and satiric troupes employ humour to deal with topical socio-political and economic issues in Egypt.

Gender and sex are the thematic preoccupation of Part IV of the book. Hence, Felix Orina and Fred Simiyu examine the sexist jokes posted online which mask vulgarity with linguistic skill thereby provoking laughter by connecting to the aesthetic tastes of the target audience in Kenya. Aesthetically, the authors “view sexist jokes as a means of facing or coping with reality as opposed to escaping from it” (p.183). They thus conclude that sexist jokes are contextualised and those contexts are where they actually derive their meanings and impact. Cheela Chilala using the Zambian experience of Dorika Ndaifulila, a comic character created by comedian, Bob Nkosh, discusses another angle to the gendered joke-performance. Relying on the technique of allusion and its wide applicability, Chilala argues that metaphorical allusion can transform meanings at sub-textual level, which can elicit laughter, anger and fun depending on interpretation. The author compares the female character of Dorika to the allusive potency of the character of Ukwa in Nigeria’s Nollywood drama series featured on Zambian television. The metamorphosis of Dorika is therefore an affirmation that joke-performance and its audience impact is anchored on “a culturally specific” frame of interpretation. Mona Eid Saad completes the contributions on gendered and sexist jokes by analysing the humorous texts of Doaa Farouk, an Egyptian joke-performer. Farouk’s joke-texts use parodies, re-contextualisation and meta-narrative intertextuality to express humour with reasonable impact. Being a woman, satirist and media figure, Farouk adopts a peculiar style in her criticism of social phenomena by veiling her viewpoints in humorous garbs in order to avoid conflicts with men. Farouk’s example under-

scores joke-performance as primarily a verbal art driven by metaphors, irony, contrast, rhetorical questions and allied literary devices.

The last section, Part V, deals with stand-up comedy as a genre of joke-performance. Samuel Igomu's essay appraises the satirical value of stand-up comedy in Nigeria. He identifies the devices of the genre to include "exaggeration, witty distortion and creative incongruity, mimicry, clownish stylization, manipulative and figurative language use" (p.245). Tracing the history of stand-up comedy in Nigeria to the precolonial era of court jesters in traditional societies, Igomu observes that the art "became serious business in Nigeria with the appearance of Ali Baba on the scene" as well as other promoters of comic shows. The last chapter of the book features a joint study by Khaemba Mulindi and Michael Ndonge who examine the reflections of ideology in "mediatized comedy" in Kenya using the *Churchill Show* as case study. The authors observe, "the *Churchill Show* profiles jokes from cultural, geographical, social, religious, economic and behavioural aspects of the society" (p.267). In contemporary era, the jokes became entrenched and reproduced for commercial purposes by TV comedians. The authors contend that "mediatized comedy" thrive on highlighting of stereotypes that emphasise difference, hence it makes impact on society by producing messages of inequalities; therein lies its ideological undertone. The authors conclude that televised ethnic jokes serve to ideologically exclude or include others and this could be harmful and negative to socio-political, economic and cultural relations.

In conclusion, *Joke Performance in Africa...* is a rare compendium that x-rays and interrogates the typology and trajectories of the comic art in Africa, from the traditional media to the modern digital platforms. It is recommended for theatre, media, culture and literary scholars and practitioners as well as all persons interested in understanding the social psychology of jokes in Africa, their evolutionary metamorphosis and visceral links with the African worldview and contemporary realities.