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## THE STAGE AESTHETICS OF ATUNYOTA ALLELUYA AKPOBOME (ALI BABA)'S STAND-UP COMEDY

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### ABSTRACT

Stand-up Comedy is an art in which a comedian performs by interacting directly with an audience. It has been in existence since classical Greek and Yoruba monarchical history. It was not regarded in Nigeria as a serious art until the emergence of Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba) in the early 1990s when it transformed into an industry. Existing literature on Stand-up Comedy have focused on the historical perspectives, performer's delivery and business management, with little attention paid to stage aesthetics. This study, therefore, investigated the stage aesthetics of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy, with a view to documenting his contribution to the entertainment industry in Nigeria. Henri Bergson's theory of laughter was adopted, while ethnographic and case study designs were utilised. Participant observation was used during 2018 *Ali Baba's spontaneity series*. The researcher watched *Ali Baba's January 1<sup>st</sup> Concert* and purposively selected audio-visual recordings of Ali Baba's shows from the 1990s when he came into comedy business till 2021. The study found that Ali Baba's appearance on the Nigerian comic scene ushered in a radical transition and transformation of Nigerian Stand-up Comedy into an innovative and economically empowering industry. The success of Ali-Baba's Stand-up Comedy business depended significantly on branding, packaging and marketing strategies. The study further revealed Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy as an experimentation of the concept of socio-aesthetic harmony, marrying aestheticism with functionalism. This essay concludes that the success story of Nigerian Stand-up Comedy is incomplete without mentioning the stage aesthetics of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy.

**Keywords:** Stand-up Comedy, Stage aesthetics, Performance nuances, Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy style.

### Introduction

There is an inadequate academic attention on the significance of Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba) to the popularisation of Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria, the country's most popular and economically empowering form of live comedy performance. The organization, content, and aesthetics of the performance receive little or no scholarly attention. Stand-up Comedy has been

studied in Nigeria by Nwankwo (2014) and Idowu (2017) as a new kind of live performance. Nevertheless, a lot more still needs to be done. As such, this has created an academic gap in the study of the fast-growing industry in Nigeria. Prominent individuals contributed to the evolution, sustenance, development and popularisation of Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria. Their creative efforts, artistic ingenuity and entrepreneurial dexterity deserve scholarly attention crucial for documentation, pedagogy and for the benefit of posterity. There is no denying the fact that Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba) is a vanguard of this movement having popularised Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria. He has informally continued to train Stand-up comedians in the country and has significantly given budding Stand-up comedians platforms to showcase their talents through his yearly shows. Therefore, an examination of the evolution, growth and popularisation of Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria will be incomplete without a reference to Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome's (Ali Baba) contributions.

Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome's (Ali Baba) art of Stand-up Comedy has, over the years, evolved into a significant form of art in Nigeria. It has added value to life, created economic empowerment, fostered social interactions, enhanced psychological and emotional stability and has substantially uplifted the international image of the country. Scholars have studied Stand-up Comedy from Gender discourse (Osisanwo and Ilesanmi, 2020), Religion (Imo 2018), Culture (Adesina and Filani 2018; Ambrose 2022), historical perspectives (Nwankwo 2015 and Aguru, 2022), performer's style (Nwankwo 2015 and Idowu, 2023), from the business management angles (Odutola 2013) etc. However, little academic attention has been paid to performance text and aesthetics of Stand-up Comedy. This has resulted in peripheral discussion of the phenomenon. Most glaring in this academic lacuna is the lack of studies emanating from the perspective of prominent practitioners of the genre in Nigeria, and this could have enriched the study of the dramatic and theatrical rudiments of Stand-up comedy.

This study, therefore, probes into the stage aesthetics of Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome's (Ali Baba) Stand-up Comedy, with a view to documenting his significant contribution to knowledge and to the flourishing entertainment industry in Nigeria. The specific aim of this study is to examine the theatrical aesthetics of performance in Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy.

### **Theoretical framework and literature**

This research adopts Henri Bergson's theory of laughter to drive the discourse and analyse the data. Since the thrust of this research is predicated upon the text and aesthetics of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy, Henri Bergson's theory of laughter readily serves as an appropriate theoretical framework to drive the study. As a theoretical postulation, Bergson's (1928) theory of laughter evaluates the concept of laughter. According to him, laughter "is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain, be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain" (3). In his opinion, one major characteristics of laughter is that it is exclusively for human. He opines that several scholars "have defined man as 'an animal which laughs.' They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to." (2)

The indispensability of tension and relief in the human society cannot be over emphasised. As much as there is need for tension there is still a need for relief which can be provided by laughter. This is the significance and functionality of laughter. Morreall (1982) and Brain (2004) share Bergson's opinion in evaluating the roles and functions of laughter in the society. While Morreall is of the opinion that "in all laughter situations we save a certain quantity of psychic energy, energy that is usually employed for some psychic purpose, but which turns out not to be needed. The discharge of this superfluous energy is laughter" (131). As a psychological component, laughter can "act like a balm; a sweet social stimulant, and sometimes like a barb," according to Brain (2004:4). When we hear the punch line, the tension in our expectations vanishes and is resolved quickly. This is why he went on to say that laughter is an affection that arises from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.

There are three traditional theories of laughter as originally established by Morreall (2009), though they are not considered as adequate for general theory, each of these theories does have the features that belong in a general theory. These theories include Relief theory, Incongruity theory and Superiority theory. Relief theory which considers the process of laughter as a means of relieving tension and a means of enhancing emotional stability, was propounded by Freud. The theory suggests that laughter relieves the nervous feeling in man and produces situation that saves psychic energy. Little (2009:16) asserts that "Relief theory, laughter (humour) taps in to repressed sources of pleasure, pressure, or anxiety. Thus, a communication's funny quality arises because it induces laughter and, with it, a release of repressions". As Bain explained, humour's embrace of "degradation" or it is celebration of mischief prompted this release. Relief theory therefore, has a lot to do with laughter because relief itself whether physical, psychological or emotional is a product of laughter.

Incongruity theory is all about event, situation, character and thinking that do not fit in into the natural pattern thinking of man which amuses and sometimes elicit laughter. Most often than not, incongruity happens when situations or events defy the normal human prediction. Morreall is of the opinion that despite the fact that theorists on incongruity had disagreement on several details about incongruity, incongruous theory is "the most widely accepted account of laughter or humour in philosophy and empirical psychology" (2009:15).

The theory of superiority views laughter as a way for us to express how happy people are about the flaws in other people. Laughter used to be associated with aggression which seems to be understood as an expression of feelings of superiority. Morreall (2011:7) asserts that free thinkers are of the opinion that "it is by revealing someone's inferiority to the person laughing". As earlier proposed, Bergson (1928) believes that laughter is hinged on superiority which he considers as social corrective. He claims that while we are humiliating them and feeling superior to them when we laugh at those who behave like machines, the humiliation actually encourages the individual to think and act more freely and less robotically. Therefore, even while laughter hurts, it helps the target of mockery return to acting like a person. In this instance, the idea that the audience is superior to the comedian has significantly shifted due to how modern culture views Stand-up Comedy and humour actors.

It is now otherwise, as we have it in the direction of Ali Baba Stand-up Comedy stage performance. Unlike before when artists were looked down upon, the situation these days show that artists are

now celebrities who command admiration and great respect in society. In this case, therefore, the audience of Ali Baba Stand-up Comedy are not originally laughing at his person out of superiority complex but to the situation Ali Baba creates during his performance. Bergson's theory of Laughter together with appendages as elucidated above is appropriate for the thesis of this study as it revolves round the creation of laughter and its commodification.

### Stand-up Comedy

Sharon and Lynn (2001:13) view Stand-up Comedy as a means of stimulating the audience and earning their support. A number of important issues are explored, such as loving stand-up comedians, being prepared for the unexpected, intimacy and proximity, chances for involvement, and sharing the humorous experience. The relevance and application of humour theory, the connection between Stand-up Comedy and sociology, audience research, and the function of laughter in Stand-up Comedy are all covered by Jason Rutter (1997:48). In Ayakoroma's 2003 study, the author looks at the factors that have shaped Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria and considers the potential benefits the genre may have for raising living standards there.

Louse Peacock's claim is strengthened by Oliver (1991:4-5), who places British Stand-up Comedy "in the context of the three major traditions of entertainment in which it had existed, namely, Music Hall and Variety, Working Men's Clubs, and Alternative Comedy". In addition to its social and political implications, he concentrates on the stylistic elements of Stand-up Comedy. Along with promoting various creative methods and particular types of social and political connotations, he also looks at how the entertainment traditions that Stand-up Comedy originated may have influenced the form's growth. Although this definition is debatable, Rao (2011), who focuses on the rise in popularity of Stand-up Comedy in society, describes it as intentional comedy performed by a comedian on a stage in front of an audience. Rao argues that even with Stand-up Comedy's growing popularity, there is still a shortage of academic research on the topic as compared to other performing disciplines like dance, theatre, and music. He posits that the reason behind this lack of attention from academics could be the low regard Stand-up Comedy holds as a traditional art form. Nwankwo (2015), opined that Nigerian Stand-up Comedy adopted elements of Western stand-up, such as microphones and organised audience gatherings, from these practices, but this does not mean that all aspects of the business are foreign. Certain acts that bear resemblance to modern Stand-up Comedy were performed in the several societies that currently comprise the nation prior to the arrival of colonialism. Among the Yoruba, they comprise *Efe* among the Yoruba people of the southwest. The Hausa/Fulani people in the north practiced *Yan Kam* and *Wawan Sarki* whereas the Igbo people in the southeast of Nigeria followed *Njakir* the persons performing these shows were mostly "clowns, fools, and jesters [who] were persons licensed by society not only to say ideas that are ordinarily unthought (and very frequently unimaginable) but to embody them, and under certain conditions.

Imo (2016:6), using Gandoki's jokes as a model, claimed that social deviations among Nigerians, including street fights, inappropriate dress codes, drug abuse, uncontrollable temperaments, vituperative and cantankerous verbal exchanges, indiscipline, immoral dispositions, and other awkward social behaviours, are signs of mental stress, anxieties, and despair brought on by harsh economic realities. In other words, Imo examines the need for training for professionalism in Nigerian Stand-up Comedy.

Stand-up Comedy is a conversation show, according to Ian (2008). This suggests an environment in which the audience the stand-up comic is speaking to is free to respond, participate, and engage. A live audience is included in the mediation process when it is conducted through recording and broadcasting. Despite its extreme polarisation, it is still a dialogic form that is performed with an audience rather than for one. It's also clear that the audience and stand-up comedian interact and form creative connections. Lesley (2011:198) shares this viewpoint, contending that there is a tangible and satisfying expression of performer/audience relations in addition to intra-audience relations. Laughter, a stimulus response to the humorous performance of the stand-up comedian, makes this interaction possible. Lesley uses comic Mike Nichols, who asserts that stand-up is the only creative life in which the enjoyment and the work happen simultaneously, to support his position. In all other forms of artistic endeavour, including theatre, the payoff occurs one act or more later. Most of the time, it happens months, years, or never at all.

In contrast, Nwankwo (2014) defines Stand-up Comedy as a performance style in which a comedian takes the stage to amuse the audience with light-hearted stories, musical numbers, mime, and other forms of entertainment, with the main goal being to make them laugh. According to Rao (2011), Stand-up Comedy, which is defined as a solo performer's purposefully humorous performance on a stage in front of an audience, is becoming increasingly popular in today's media and entertainment landscape. The performance component that is a part of Stand-up Comedy is captured by this definition. It highlights how unique the involved artist is. Therefore, Stand-up Comedy is a type of comedy where the performer, also known as a stand-up comedian, gets up on stage and engages with the audience directly. A stand-up comedian, until recently, was a solo performer who amuses his audience by telling humorous jokes on stage. Stand-up Comedy can also be described as a performing art form and a social structure that revolves around the "production and consumption" of "humorous narrative." According to Mintz (1985), a Stand-up Comedy show is characterised as a meeting place where a lone performer interacts with an audience while acting hilariously or stating humorous things directly (Filani, 2015).

Although, "Stand-up" Comedy as its name suggests is performed while the performer stands in front of the audience, it is not mandatory. Stand-up Comedy is perceived as "an exaggerated portrayal of socio-cultural realities that highlight the vices and foibles of society" (Idowu, 2017:35). He also emphasises how the economic and cultural convergence and divergence of Stand-up Comedy are inextricably linked to the personal and collective experiences of the environment. Comedy clubs, bars, nightclubs, theatres, colleges, and neo-burlesques are common venues for Stand-up Comedy performances. Stand-up is frequently commercially distributed via television, DVD, CD, and the internet when it is not performed live. The audience's immediate input is very important to the comedian's performance. A stand-up comic is always under pressure to deliver the constant stream of laughs that the audience expects. A Stand-up Comedy show may have a "headline" or "showcase" format, or it may feature just one comedian. Openers typically start a headline format. They are frequently the master of ceremonies (MC), compère (UK), or host, who not only introduces the other artists but also welcomes, engages, and warms up the audience. After one or two 15–20-minute sets by "middle" or "featured" performers, there is a main artist who performs longer. When various performers play for almost the same amount of time, it's called a "showcase" format; these types of shows are usually found at larger events because booking multiple names

allows for a greater venue than booking individual comedians. Smaller spaces such as Jongleurs or the Comedy Cellar frequently employ this structure.

### **Performance Aesthetics of Stand-up Comedy**

The Concept of aesthetics is multidimensional. Though originated from philosophy, it now encompasses all art forms. Shelley (2017) submits that since its introduction to the philosophical canon in the eighteenth century, the term "aesthetic" has come to refer to a variety of concepts, including values, experiences, attitudes, and judgments. Generally speaking, opinions about one or more of these categories have been divided by aesthetic theories: whether or not artworks are intrinsically beautiful objects; the best way to represent the elusive distinction between an aesthetic and practical attitude; whether or not to define aesthetic experience in terms of its representational or phenomenological content; and the best way to understand the relationship between aesthetic experience and thought processes. Aesthetics is the judgement of the beauty or otherwise of a work of art and how it arrives at its judgement through consideration of questions like "what is art", what is a work of art?", and "what makes good art?" Beauty is extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic beauty is physical. It has to do with what can be seen while intrinsic beauty has to do with the qualities, elements and characteristics of an entity, be it work of art or of nature. As such, aesthetics is concerned with the appreciation of intrinsic and extrinsic beauty.

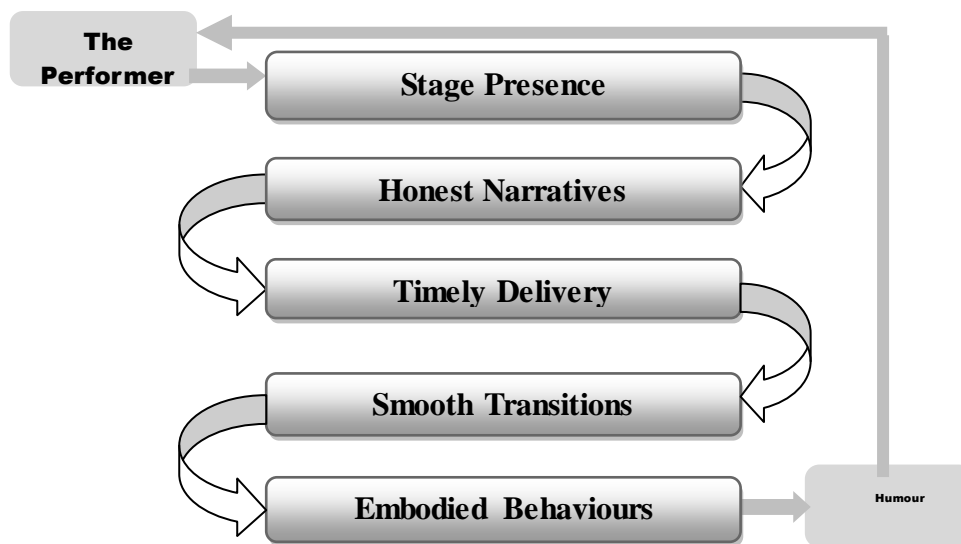
Aestheticians have divergent opinions about the aesthetics in the theatre. While some agree that it is applicable to Stand-up Comedy, a dramatic genre that thrives on jokes, humour and laughter, others have difficulties in accepting the position. Elliott (2016) and Moira (2018) explained that some jokes are truly beautiful but to most people. Another philosopher, Berys Gaut, is cited by Moira March to support her argument. Gaut acknowledges that "perhaps a few jokes are works of art, but most are not" (online). Moira (2018:299) continues by citing Kuipers, whose opinion hinges on the fact that jokes are too vernacular. He believes that the philosophical approach to art (and humour) is based on a universalising assumption in which one kind of art is favoured by modern Western principle which serves as a touchstone for passing judgement on all aesthetics forms.

It is pertinent to note that within the context of this study, aesthetics is seen from the perspective of intrinsic qualities of stand-up comedy performance. As such we are seeing aesthetics from the point of view of performance elements inherent in Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy. A critical examination of Ali Baba performance shows that he employs the use of spontaneity which thrives on improvisation. This is one of the strongest elements of Ali Baba's performance style. Spontaneity, as it is used within his performance, enhances the natural artistic interaction between him and the audience. It also affords him an effective control of the audience. Although most comedians are naturally funny, Nwankwo (2014), citing Ajaye (2002:37), asserts that in order to be a professional performer, one must be able to "be funny on demand regardless of your emotional state". He believes that the ability to make people laugh is fundamental to the craft of Stand-up Comedy, regardless of the performer's emotional state.

Characterisation is another element of Stand-up Comedy. This deals with various character interpretations as shown in role playing and switching which commands stage shows. Nwankwo (2014) feels that it behoves on the Stand-up comedians, irrespective of their emotional state, to be in control of their arts and adopt an effective performance mechanism that grasps the interest of the audience.

## Elements of Stand-up Comedy

Some elements of Stand-up Comedy are highlighted by Ajaye (2002). These include points of view and true thoughts, honesty, delivery, timing, visuals, voice characterisations and audio effects, concentration, stage presence, and smooth transitions. A Stand-up comedian who endeavours to effectively connect his/her jokes will excite his/her audience till he/she gets positive feedback, Ajaye captures this graphically in fig 2 below. The arrows in the diagram indicate that all the elements work simultaneously beginning with the performer and ending with humour, then the cycle starts all over again.



**Figure 2: Ajaye's (2002) Diagrammatic Illustration of the Elements of Stand-up Comedy**

## Methodology

Qualitative research design was adopted for this study using case study. The design is appropriate because it involves a systematic and comprehensive procedure for the collection of information from key informants (via structured and unstructured interviews) who are strategically positioned to offer credible information about the text and aesthetics of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy. Participant observation method was also instrumental to the investigation because it afforded the researcher easy access to the depth of the professional activities of the case study. The researcher, being insider participant observer who has had decades of eye witness experience of Ali Baba's shows as participant on many occasions, was able to generate verifiable data about the performance nuances of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy. This researcher painstakingly content-analysed purposively selected video recordings of Ali Baba's performances, did a holistic review of his notes taken while participating in some of Ali Baba's performances and shows as a performer and judge. Secondary data depended on a robust review of existing essays, articles, books, journals, magazines and periodicals about the concept of comedy, Stand-up Comedy, evolution, development and global practices of Stand-up Comedy.

The case study of the investigation, Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome resides in Lagos and his company office is at Ikoyi. Data is also collected from Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome's shows done outside

Nigeria. The research started from 2018 and lasted till 2023. While the period of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy investigated covered 1993 to 2023 making a total period of thirty years. The study lasted for close to four years.

While content analysis was employed as the main instrument for data collection, interview was used as complementary qualitative instrument to derive more information to validate results obtained from data analysed. Participant observation enabled the researcher to note and record the performance aesthetics of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy. The sample for this study is made up of six respondents; one principal (Case Study) and five key informants. Key informant sampling method was employed to facilitate credible and dependable data about the case study, the case study being Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (AKA Ali Baba) the key informants were purposively selected among the case study's close associates. They include; Ayodeji Richard Makun (AY) who was with Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba) right from the beginning of their career. Segun Ogundipe of *Lafup* fame was Ali Baba's apprentice who he mentored for close to a decade. Helen Paul, whose stage name is Tatafo was considered as a key informant and interviewed because of her involvement in Ali Baba's success story.

## Findings and Discussion

### The Theatrical Aesthetics of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy

Beauty and how to appreciate it are the focus of aesthetics. In order to understand the essence of beauty and how to appreciate it, one must first understand certain guiding principles that determine whether an object is regarded beautiful or not. Aesthetics is the determination and notions of the beauty or otherwise of a work of art based on a set of principles underlying the work of art, or of an artist or artistic movement. Thus, it can be said that the state or the degree of beauty of the things in focus is relational; this is because the judgement depends on a set of principles. From the foregoing, it can be inferred that aesthetics is a subfield of philosophy and that it shares a close relationship with the philosophy of art, which covers ideas like interpretation, representation, and expression in the study of the nature of art.

Ali Baba, known not only for his widespread acclaim as a comedian but also for his mastery of the art form, possesses a distinctive style and an acute perceptiveness of comedic aesthetics. When discussing the key aesthetic aspects of Ali Baba's comedy, one cannot overlook his impeccable timing and delivery, which serve as fundamental components of his craft. Displaying a natural sense of rhythm and pacing, Ali Baba adeptly executes his punch-lines with precision, thereby building anticipation for comedic payoffs.

Whether employing rapid-fire jokes to maintain a fast pace or strategically utilising deliberate pauses to heighten comedic effect, Ali Baba possesses the innate ability to captivate his audience, ensuring their engagement and continuous laughter throughout his performance. Another noteworthy characteristic of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy lies in his remarkable talent for embodying various personas and characters, thereby injecting depth and diversity into his performances. By seamlessly transitioning into playful alter egos or embodying exaggerated caricatures, Ali Baba breathes life into his jokes using vivid characterisation and physicality. It is through this skilful technique that Ali Baba manages to breathe relatability into his comedic situations, allowing them to resonate with his audience's experiences and perceptions. Ali Baba's comedy also exhibits a profound appreciation for the aesthetic beauty found in his keen powers of

observation and astute commentary on everyday life.

Demonstrating a remarkable ability to find humour in the mundane, Ali Baba effortlessly transforms ordinary situations into comedic gold using sharp wit and clever wordplay. Be it through riffing on social norms, cultural idiosyncrasies, or personal anecdotes, the ace comedian, inadvertently thrives on a psychological component of laughter as propounded by Bergson, that laughter can "act like a balm; a sweet social stimulant, and sometimes like a barb," (Brain, 2004: p. 4). When we hear the punch line, the tension in our expectations vanishes and is resolved quickly. Therefore, he went on to say that laughter is an affection that arises from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing (p. 4).

Ali Baba's observational humour strikes a chord with audiences by skilfully highlighting the absurdities and contradictions of human behaviour. Moreover, Ali Baba's comedy is deeply rooted in Nigerian culture, drawing inspiration from the nation's rich traditions, languages, and social dynamics. By skilfully incorporating cultural references, vernacular expressions, and colloquialisms into his jokes, Ali Baba manages to create a sense of authenticity and relatability for his audience. In celebrating Nigeria's cultural heritage and diversity, Ali Baba's comedy serves as a reflection of the country's collective identity and shared experiences, fostering a connection with his audience that transcends mere entertainment.

Furthermore, Ali Baba's comedy goes beyond the realm of amusement, often carrying underlying social commentary and political satire. Employing humour as a powerful tool for critiquing societal norms, challenging authority, and advocating for social change, Ali Baba exhibits a profound understanding of the impact comedic discourse can have. Through his biting satire and incisive commentary, Ali Baba fearlessly addresses pressing issues such as corruption, governance, and socio-economic disparities, compelling his audiences to engage in critical self-reflection on the realities of Nigerian society. In other words, Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy stands as a testament to the aesthetic beauty that lies within the art form. Characterized by his impeccable timing, vivid characterization, observational humour, cultural relevance, and social commentary, Ali Baba captivates audiences, eliciting laughter and provoking thought on matters of national importance. Serving as both a comedic trailblazer and cultural icon, Ali Baba continues to inspire and entertain, leaving an indelible mark on Nigeria's comedic landscape.

The following is a discussion of the extrinsic and intrinsic qualities of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy. Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy presentation complies with known performance aesthetics, Ali Baba does not merely render lines or narrate his joke, he dramatises them showcasing dramatic nuances which include but not limited to the following; Costume and Make-up, Stage Presence, Role playing/Character switch, Line delivery, Code Switching, Use of Pantomimic dramatization, Use of Multimedia platform and Narrative Techniques.

### **i. Costume and Make-up**

Unlike some of his predecessors who were known for stereotype costumes, Ali Baba sees costume, apart from depicting specific character that are linked to occasions where he is performing, as what is needed for establishing one's brand. No matter what he is wearing, he dresses very expensively whether corporate or casual. He wears state of the art fabrics and designer's choice. At his annual concert tagged *Ali Baba January 1st Concert* which is usually attended by the high and mighty in the society, he makes it a point of duty to be corporately but expensively dressed.



**Plate 2: Ali Baba in a Three-Piece Tuxedo Dressed to Suit the Calibre of the Audience he is Performing for.**

Picture is screen captured from *Ali Baba January 1st Concert 2019* edition.

For him, it is good for business and it is a case of “the way you are dressed is the way you are addressed”. If comedy must be lucrative and the comedians bargaining power must be significant, then the way he presents himself matters. *Ali Baba January 1st Concert* which is an annual event takes place in the 5-star Eko Hotel and Suites where anybody, no matter how highly placed in the society, will feel comfortable to attend. Over time, Ali Baba earned himself the respect from the shakers and movers of the society who, in loyalty, attend his concert religiously. It, therefore, will be abnormal for him no matter the story line or joke, to dress in a way the audience cannot identify with. Besides, as a matter of aesthetics, Stand-up Comedy does not depend on character costumes as the comedians move from joke to joke depicting several characters of different ages and time in a single performance.

The score point of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy is in his stage presence and this is significantly enhanced by what he wears/costume. By extension, his costume depends largely on the occasion involved. As hinted earlier, when he is casually dressed, he wears expensive casual wears from designer's t-shirt to jeans and canvases. When he is corporately dressed, he wears different types of suit; three-piece suit, gabardine with accessories to match. His different audiences readily identify with him and enthusiastically pay his gate fees as they see such event as belonging to "happening" circle and those that matter in the community. His general comportment during *Ali Baba January 1st Concert* is that of a preacher or a motivational speaker - calm, cool and collected and dresses as such. Apart from packaging, it is observable that this earns him the audiences' respect and the moral undertone of his jokes sinks well. In his performance at *The Circus*, he didn't go with his usual corporate wears as the occasion is peopled by youths and middle-class audience of the society. Hence, he came to the show with his casual top and jean to suit the event.



**Plate 3: Ali Baba at Lafup's *The Circus* Casually Dressed to Suit the Audience at the Circus**  
Picture screen captured from event's video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHRLbwcTOI8>

## ii. Stage Presence

One cannot but notice Ali Baba's presence on stage the way he carries himself. Even when on an empty space, he has an imposing presence. His carriage, use of space, movements and general disposition give a picture of him occupying the entire space. Ali Baba is so creative with the rendition of his joke that he ensures none of his audience is left behind and creates motivation for such distribution. He makes his audience see a dramatic moving picture on stage. His audience see him switching among various imaginary characters and moving around situations on stage. He dramatised an entire joke of President Obasanjo coming into an event that Ali Baba was an MC and Obasanjo using the opportunity to boo Ali Baba over his supposed outrageous honorarium. In that joke, Ali practically staged the scenario. He convincingly improvised a podium and gave a dramatic illustration of Obasanjo and other Heads of States walking into the event. One after the other, Ali switched between the characters he wanted to talk about. In that particular joke, he is seen combining the functions of a director, actor, stage manager and set designer. While playing on proscenium, he favours down-stage area which is an attempt to get closer to the audience and carry them along in all his activities, consciously breaking the forth wall.

### iii. Role playing/Character switch/Use of Stage

Ali Baba's dexterity is exhibited in his presentations. He switches and becomes the character in some of his jokes. He creates imaginary scenario and plays the scenes out switching from one character to another. In some cases, as the situation demands, he modulates his voice to depict character trait or mannerism. Despite being in the same audience-specific costume, his role-playing dexterity does not negatively affect his audience's willing suspension of disbelief. In the joke of the "Sadist Client" who is not favourably disposed to the comedian's honorarium which he considers too high. For Ali Baba to capture the character's resentment, he became the character himself, sits and uses the character voice and language. The audience notices the transition from the story teller to the character which comes on the spur of the moment as the story was being narrated. With his prowess, he made the audience visualise multiple characters in a story as he acted it. The joke of expensive mall where Ali Baba assumed the shoppers' character, he moves from the podium into an imaginary sector of an expensive shopping mall and improvised a shopping item using a microphone stand thus creating a visual dramatic picture of the role. By so doing, Ali uses visual variety to break the monopoly of standing on the same spot narrating a story.

Another instance of role playing is the joke of "jogging". Ali Baba imitates the mannerism of people jugging at Mushin or VI and he was seen actually "jugging" on stage capturing the two distinct environments mentioned in the joke. In America, in a show organised by Mcpc and Shayi, he cracked a joke about Obasanjo and literarily goes into role playing Obasanjo's mannerism. Also,

an instance of role playing was in one of his jokes in America where he hissed like women and especially Yoruba women. He also employed his role-playing skills in the joke of “Military command” which is described as mixture of Hausa and English language and mimicked the instruction being given using the voice of the military instructor. Equally, in the same joke, he demonstrated and played out the recruit’s response to Ali Baba’s father on the “Shoot at random” command. Another good example can be seen in the “Indian Ambassador and Snake” joke, where the narrator (Ali Baba) played the role of the Indian Ambassador and used Indian accent.

He is a multitalented comedian who annexes lot of dramatic techniques in his Stand-up Comedy. He is familiar with the stage geography, does not favour any part of the audience, occupies the entire space and evenly distributes his lines to the audience. He employs movements extempore (not previously blocked) as an ongoing joke dictates. He creates an imaginary scene, designating various parts of the stage for specific activities. He plays on levels as in the case of Bersurg and the Dogs. He stood on a speaker down stage left, creating the illusion of a car parked at the left side of the house's frontage, and improvised the car top that Bersurg climbed on. He placed the building's hypothetical entrance in the story's upstage centre. Though all of these are imaginary, he was precise and never muddles them up. Ali Baba switched among the various characters in “Baba Ibadan joke” as though in a real theatre, directed, he placed different characters at different part of the stage and moved from one part of the stage to another to assume and play various characters.

#### **iv. Code Switching**

It is observed that Ali Baba’s diction is influenced by the occasion and calibre of audience but he uses Standard English, occasionally punctuated by Pidgin English. When the exigencies of performance dictate, he switches code and uses a character’s native language and, in some cases, dialect, to situate the character in a locality. An instance of this is the joke on “Yoruba man and His Car” where when Yoruba man is heartbroken over the theft of his car and switches to Yoruba language to depict the setting and locality of that scenario. Ditto for the use of “Chineke!” to depict the nationality of an Igbo person in the “Lamborghini” joke. Also, in the “Lamborghini” joke that involves two ethnic groups, Ali switched between Yoruba and Igbo languages to distinguish between the ethnic nationalities represented by both characters. This he does with appropriate voice modulation and reflection. “Fun l’ategbe” in the the “boxers” joke which he did in America is also code switching.

#### **v. Use of Pantomimic Dramatisation**

Pantomimic dramatisation is another recurrent feature of Ali Baba's performance. In order to eradicate visual boredom and create varieties, he uses pantomimic dramatisation. Where necessary he concocts and disrupts his countenance, stretches his mouth in various shapes, does rigorous physical demonstrations as in the case of "Samuel Peters" joke where he mimics the Yoruba coach encouraging the boxers to fight well, shouting "Fun l'ategbe". Another example of pantomimic dramatisation is vivid in the joke about "expectations from comedian" where he said people expect jokes from comedian anytime they are seen. He queried whether it equally expected that a boxer should be expected to punch wherever he/she is found. He did that hitting himself on the face to demonstrate punching. At *The Circus* while doing "Dan and the Lion" joke, he employed pantomimic dramatisation to visually capture the satisfactory countenance of the lion after eating the guard. He employs pantomimic dramatisation to further create mind's picture of dramatic engagements. This artistic ingenuity can be likened to Arthol Fugard's (1972) *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* where Style creates an imaginary photographic studio and a family posing for a snap.



**Plate 4: Ali Baba at *The Circus* while doing "Baba Ibadan News paper vendor" joke and Pantomimically Dramatising when Baba Ibadan bent down to drop the News paper.**

Picture screen grabbed from event's video available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHRLbwcTOI8>

**vi. Use of Multimedia Platform**

Ali Baba is comfortable and very familiar with his terrain. He annexes technology to make his performance not only contemporary, but spell binding and colourful. In some cases, he uses slides as a sort of prompter to ensure a smooth flow of the jokes while he is on a joke, his orientation is towards the audience. At the end of the joke just before another one, he takes a glance at the screen where images are being projected and he remembers the next joke in the sequence he had orchestrated it and as prompted by what is projected on the screen.



**Plate 5: Ali Baba Employing Multimedia Devices to Project Images on Screen and as Background Display Respectively.**

Pictures are screen captured from *Ali Baba January 1st Concert s 2019* edition.



**Plate 6: Ali Baba Employing Multimedia Devices to Project Images on Screen and as Background Display Respectively.** Pictures are screen captured from *Ali Baba January 1st Concert s* 2018 edition.

**vii. Theatrical Mise en Scene**

The *mise en scene* of Ali Baba's concerts are specifically taken care of. Observation reveals that he plays/performs largely on a semi trust/semi runway stage purposely designed to integrate the audience into his performance. Ali Baba does not stand far from his audience or be seen as a classical actor but seen as a Brechtian performer who emerges from the audience, tells them their stories for the edification of their collective sensibility. Little wonder that Ali Baba performs as though he is a character in a story that the audience is actively involved in. This is largely what the Thrust stage does. At the base of the stage that serves as the podium is an empty space but for a projector screen for multimedia display. The backgrounds of his concerts are colourful display of multimedia effect achieved by light and digital projections.

**viii. Audience Involvement and Participation**

A deliberate effort is made to consistently break the fourth wall, an imagined partition separating the artists and the audience, in order to foster a dialogue, integrate the audience, and educate them. He directly involves the audience by bringing some members of the audience physically on stage as in the case of the "Intimidation" joke where he invited Ejiro, his second son (a huge young man) to lead out a participant in the manner of a bully. He could have ordinarily narrated that without involving anybody but he specifically involved the audience to constantly remind the audience that he was merely cracking a joke thus while entertaining them, he informs and educates.

Ali Baba, in one of the jokes in America, directly addressed the photographer and told him to snap an action picture of him where he punctuated the joke by bringing the photographer into the narrative. He told him to snap his picture while in action. Thus, the photographer who is part of the audience is "dragged" into the scene. Ali Baba in his performance at *The Circus* is seen coming on stage with a disposable plastic cup of wine which he brought from the midst of the audience to show his participation, identification and involvement with his audience. Ali Baba identifies members of his audience by name at *The Circus* when he said "Kate shut up" during the rendition of one of his lines. This shows a high level of the familiarity he has with his audience. Ali Baba controls audience involvement in his performance. He is never in a hurry when the audience laughs heartily because of a punch line. Ali Baba would rather pause for them to enjoy that moment or join in the laughter. This is observed to function as transition between jokes.

**ix. Dramatic (Conversational) Narrative Technique**

Ali Baba varies the narrative techniques he employs in his jokes. Two major narrative techniques are common: The first-person narrative technique and the eye of God (omniscient) narrative technique. In some cases, he narrates his jokes around himself assuming a character in the joke whose story is narrated from his point of view. In such cases, he employs the “first-person narrative technique. He often employs the dialogue or conversational style. He switches from characters and imitates the various characters’ manner of speaking and gesticulating. This technique enhances believability as in the case of “seeing is believing”. Examples of jokes told from the first-person point of view are:

1. Baba Ibadan
2. Basorge
3. Jumbo Honourarium
4. Event Planner and Marriage counsellor
5. Women’s passion for money
6. Calabar and Dogs
7. Intimidation
8. Corporate bellman/waiter
9. Naija Hospital
10. Monarchs are human too
11. Indian Ambassador and his snake.

When the setting calls for it, He uses the eye of God/Omniscient narrative technique where he can achieve a panoramic point of view narration. Examples of such jokes include but not limited to:

1. The sadist client
2. Aftermath of boxing match
3. Transferred epitaph
4. Expensive shopping mall
5. Dino Melaye
6. Lamborghini
7. Warri no dey carry last
8. Dan and his lion pet
9. Mysterious Warri house

The aesthetics of Ali Baba’s Stand-up Comedy agrees with Bergson’s postulation that comedy is anything that can make people laugh, and this is usually accomplished by a combination of factors such as the audience perceiving the fun object as harmless to the participants in the situation,

appealing to the intellect and the emotions, appealing to the inelasticity of bodies and minds, and connecting the absurd to humanity. All the reckoned performance nuances of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy resonate with Bergson's theory of laughter.

### **Conclusion**

Following the findings of this study which are predicated on the evaluation of the performance aesthetics of Ali Baba's Stand-up Comedy within the context of global standard of theory and practice, driven by Bergson's theory of laughter, the following conclusions are arrived at. Stand-up Comedy is a socio-cultural practice and, as such, must creatively and humourously propagate culture. Stand-up Comedy is generally a work of art, particularly performing art and, therefore, must perform the cardinal roles of works of art which include entertainment, education and information. For Stand-up Comedy to be worth its salt, practitioners must combine talent with skill. This study further concludes that the success story of Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria is grossly incomplete without the mention of Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (Ali Baba). Ali Baba's appearance on the Nigerian Stand-up Comedy scene changed the form and content of Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria and initiated a reorientation of the societal conception and perception of the art and the artist. Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria is a veritable channel of conscientisation, individual economic empowerment and national growth.

### **Recommendation**

In view of Ali Baba's standardisation of Stand-up Comedy, it is evident that Stand-up Comedy qualifies to be classified as a genre in dramatic arts. It is therefore recommended that Stand-up Comedy, based on the dramatic nuances that Ali Baba has evolved, be studied in school as a specific course in the performing arts and if possible, an area of specialisation. It is recommended that owing to the possibility of Stand-up Comedy to boost national economy and improve national foreign exchange reserve, Nigerian government should create enabling environment for Stand-up Comedy to thrive. Government should provide financial supports to its practitioners in order to encourage and sustain creativity in this profession. It is further recommended that corporate and non-governmental organisations should institute awards to promote scholarship in arts, particularly in Stand-up Comedy as it has the potential of earning the nation international recognition and fame. It is recommended that in recognition of Ali Baba's effort in changing the status of Stand-up Comedy in Nigeria, creating employment opportunity for teaming Nigerian youth and helping to grow national economy, he should be awarded national honour and immortalised. Finally, it is recommended that a professional body, strongly supported by the government, should be established to moderate the activities in the Stand-up Comedy industry.

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