

No Longer a Laughing Matter

Women Comics and the Social Media Space in Nigeria

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New Sites of Meaning-Making

Women comics in Nigeria tend to side-step traditional stand-up comedy stages. They perform on social media, a new means to circulate humor throughout the country, as in the rest of the world. These comedians disrupt the hegemonic structures of humor that make women the butt of jokes—which in Nigeria are mostly delivered by male comics. Before social media, few women did stand-up. This situation was sustained by the myth that women are not funny. In fact, during the first six years of their lives, girls in some cultures are trained to repress humor (see McGhee 1979; Kay 2018:48). As a result, there were very few women comics in theatre, television, or radio in the 1980s, or as stand-up comics in the 1990s. Those who did perform joined their male counterparts in stereotyping women in their jokes in an effort to gain popularity.¹

The few women comics who did perform in Nigeria during that period moved on to other fields and platforms: Chioma Omeruah (known as Chigul) mostly divides her time between music and screen acting (Ben-Nwankwo and Olonilua 2017); Helen Paul went back to university for doctoral studies,

1. As an ardent fan of Nigerian comedy, I saw the live performances of all comedians named in this article, watched available YouTube videos, did extensive online research, and spoke with comedians and audience members. Research for this article was sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

and eventually opened two boutiques in Atlanta, Georgia (itsshelenpaul 2021); Najite Dede became a video director (in Vanguard 2010). Recently, however, the liberalization of social media has triggered a growing trend of a new generation of women comics who have performed on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. Digital media facilitate reaching a wider audience than television, radio, or stand-up stages. The increased availability of digital media, as well as the increased demand for comic content, driven by Nigeria's socioeconomic problems, has made room for more women comedians. But despite their success, these comedians have received little academic attention. There are only journalistic interviews focusing on their biographies, not analyses of the structure or meaning of their performances.

Nigerian female comics are now leveraging social media as outlets for their artistic expression, subverting sexist jokes and conventional outlets for the production of humor. One such comic is Gloria Oloruntobi (known as Maraji), who has produced YouTube skits over the past several years, mainly in 2020 when live acts were banned due to Covid-19. Maraji represents a growing number of young female humorists who circulate their routines on YouTube. Maraji subverts both hegemonic spaces and the traditionally male-centered content of jokes.

Comedy and the Rise of Social Media Comedians

Skits on social media in Nigeria began in 2013 when comedian Mark Angel published on YouTube his first successful act, "Oga Landlord." He eventually began to feature his niece, Emmanuella Samuel and her cousin, "Aunty" Success Madubuiké. The success and popularity of their skits have been due to the ever-increasing accessibility of social media in Nigeria. Nigerians living throughout the diaspora who long for nostalgic comedies from the homeland can now watch these skits around the world. These factors have contributed to the recent success of Nigerian comedy including the rise of more social media comics such as Maraji.

In 2015, Maraji — after playing funny, girlfriend roles in two music videos, *Something Light* by Falz and *Single and Searching* by Yemi Alade, featuring Falz — began producing her own videos, playing all the roles and editing the parts together.² Maraji's skits often use irony and incongruity. For instance, "How Parents Help with Homework" compares the differences between how white European and African mothers help guide their children through homework. The white European mother is patient with her son, as seen in the following dialogue excerpted from the YouTube skit:

EUROPEAN MOTHER: (*In British accent*) So the first question says two plus two. So, what do you think the answer is?

JOHNNY: Seven.

EUROPEAN MOTHER: No, Johnny. The answer is not seven. It is four. Two plus two is four. So, write that down. (*Johnny writes it*). (Unveal Afrobeats 2019)³

Figure 1. (previous page) Daddy Glo interacting with Guest 1 and Guest 2. "African Dads in Public vs in Private," from Maraji's World YouTube video, 23 March 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWdQ4Dgt6-M (Screenshot by TDR)

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2. Folarin Falana (widely known as Falz) is a Nigerian rapper, songwriter, and actor. Yemi Eberachi Alade (known as Yemi Alade) is a Nigerian singer, activist, actress, and songwriter.

3. All excerpts from YouTube videos are my transcriptions, with nonverbal elements added as stage directions.

In spite of Johnny's inability to give the right answer, his mother is gentle and does not punish him but rather gives him the correct answer. Johnny suffers no physical pain or lowered self-esteem. In contrast, the African mother does not hesitate to berate her son:

JOHNNY: (*In Nigerian accent*) Mummy, I did not know my homework o.

AFRICAN MOTHER: Which one?

JOHNNY: Mathematics.

AFRICAN MOTHER: I know na. When dem dey teach you, you no go hear. You no go put ear for ground, you go dey play. Come here. Ehen, they said two plus two. Two plus two. Wetin be two plus two?

JOHNNY: Ten

AFRICAN MOTHER: Eh? (*Raises her hand and hits Johnny hard on the back. He screams in pain.*) Two plus two?

JOHNNY: (*Scared, in tears*) Is it seven?

AFRICAN MOTHER: (*Hits Johnny harder*) Oh, my Jesus! Oh, my God!!

JOHNNY: (*More scared, in tears*) Is it one? ...Is it four?

AFRICAN MOTHER: Oya write am. (*Johnny obeys.*) Which kind chicken handwriting be this? You no go fit write? (*She slaps him much harder and repeatedly; Johnny screams louder, writhing in pain.*) Oya, next question.

JOHNNY: (*In tears*) I don't want to do again. I don't want to do again. (*Exits*)

AFRICAN MOTHER: Come back here! (Unveal Afrobeats 2019)

Enacting all the roles in this skit, Maraji is playing on the stereotype of African parents, which holds that they are harsh and even violent towards their children; and European parents, which holds that they are easygoing with theirs. By so doing, she also ridicules some African parents who truly believe that violence towards children helps them learn to do things correctly on their own. The African Mother in the skit is aggressive and impatient with her son. Each time Johnny gives a wrong answer, she hits him harder and poses the question more harshly to him, as though the beating would reset his brain to yield the right answer. Rather than teach him the correct result, she beats him more and more, until Johnny guesses correctly.

In the video the European Mother dresses far more conservatively than her African counterpart. She wears a beautiful wig and a pair of glasses and speaks sensibly, prompting Johnny to key into her decorous disposition. On the other hand, the African Mother wears a headscarf and a wrapper tied across her chest so that the straps of her brassiere are visible to the audience. These make her look sloppy, which makes the spectators laugh. Therefore, even though Johnny wears the same costume in both parts of the skit — a button-down shirt, a baseball cap turned backwards, and a pair of glasses — his responses to the African Mother are lackadaisical, ostensibly taking his cue from her appearance. What accentuates laughter here are Johnny's reactions to the beatings from the African Mother: he opens his mouth wide and screams uncontrollably in a shrill voice, often shutting his eyes to form a grimace while jerking with each smack. In addition, laughter is elicited through the incongruity arising from the juxtaposition of two very different kinds of women. While the European Mother calmly addresses the issue of homework, the African Mother is agitated. The African Mother points to heaven and swears to destroy Johnny, if he does not give the right answer. Her allusions to "Jesus" and "God" while causing harm to Johnny are both contradictory and funny. Interestingly, the superior role assigned to the European Mother does not pose a problem for the Nigerian audience because the skit was created by a fellow Nigerian. This brings to the fore the politics of meaning in comedy: the routine would have been viewed as racist if it was done by a European. But because

HOW PARENTS HELP



SCRIBE

WITH HOMEWORK

Figure 2. European Mother correcting Johnny. "How Parents Help with Homework," from Afrobeat's YouTube video, 7 October 2019. www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVwSnJJBFy8 (Screenshot by TDR)

Maraji belongs to the black community, she is absolved of all European trappings, including suspicions of attempting to assert white superiority over black people; the tension that would have arisen from a similar joke by a European is not a factor due to the identity of the comic.

Cross-gender acting is a hallmark of Maraji's comedy routines. Seeing a young female comic playing all the characters, male and female, draws laughter from Nigerian audiences. Importantly, Maraji's ability to produce skits without male performers challenges the dominance of men in the field.

Nigerian women's contributions to comedy have always been underreported, while the history of male comics dates to the 17th century. Prior to the colonial period, comedic performance was populated and propagated by men. Comedy was first formalized when royal jesters in the Oyo kingdom (1608–1800) were authorized by their king to create "jokes out of happenings around the palace" (Imo 2016:44). That this authority was given only to men evidences the sexism of the period, which persisted into modern times. The itinerant artists eventually influenced the development of Nigerian professional theatre (Aguoru 2022), and the patriarchal perspectives of their performances endured up to the colonial era when the first television station in tropical Africa — Western Nigerian Television — was established in 1959, enabling widespread coverage of performances. As television grew more available, the traveling troupes began to disappear and some of their performers moved to the new medium. Moses Olaiya, known as Baba Sala, was one



Figure 3. African Mother smacks Johnny for getting the wrong answer. “How Parents Help with Homework,” from Afrobeat’s YouTube video, 7 October 2019. www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVwSnJJBFy8 (Screenshot by TDR)

such performer. He appeared in outlandish costumes and explored incongruous situations such as “foolishness in wisdom,” the cowardly braggart, or even the over-confident husband physically and verbally floored by his wife (Bamidele 2001:56; Fosudo 2009/2010:7–8). Several phases of comedy gained popularity after independence in 1960: master of ceremonies acts at weddings and other events, John Chukwu’s comedy at his Klass Night Club in the 1980s, and the “comic entrepreneurship” era triggered by hunger and unemployment among Nigerian youths (Imo 2016:50–51), and ultimately male-dominated stand-up comedy, which came to the fore in 1995 with *Nite of a Thousand Laughs*, a live show originated and hosted by Opa Williams, considered to be the “father” of modern stand-up comedy in Nigeria.

More recently, social media has made it possible for marginal performers who had been relegated to the fringes to circulate widely and find new audiences. Digital technologies have the capacity “to re-center alternative perspectives to prevailing orthodoxies” (Yeku 2018:ii). The growth and popularity of short, sharp comic sketches has been attributed to “the sociology of the shrinking collective attention span,” which has, in turn, “fueled the shift of video content to the smaller [smartphone screens]” (Awa-Kalu 2016:1). People’s increasing fondness for social media comedy peaked during the Covid-19 lockdown when live performances were banned. In Nigeria female comedians who create skits with subaltern content proliferated.

Maraji, born on 6 February 1997 and a native of Edo State in the South South geopolitical zone of Nigeria, was not widely known until 2015, but now owns and operates a social media account with 1,300,000 followers on Instagram as of 21 October 2022. In interviews I conducted with some of her followers, they unanimously endorsed her act and confirmed her agency and status as an “influencer” of popular tastes and meanings (Amaefula 2021a). Ugochi, in particular, describes her as “a [worthy] role model for talented young women in Nigeria” (in Amaefula 2021a). Maraji’s humorous cultural content on social media challenges the male domination of both live and mainstream media. Nor is Maraji alone in breaking through by taking advantage of the Covid-19 lockdown to move her work to online platforms. Other comedians of her ilk such as Taaooma, Oshisko Twins, Emmanuella, and Omo Ibadan have also resisted men’s hegemony, continuing to demonstrate “how this media dynamic has energized new capillaries of expressivity for young people in Nigeria” (Ugor 2009:387).

Maraji's Social Media Skits

Techniques and Issues

Maraji plays on everyday *mise-en-scènes* that are familiar to her audience—a living room, bedroom, on the street, in a car, among others. None of her routines needs a complicated set or constructed environment. The lighting ranges from daylight to regular household electric lamps. Her videos are clearly substandard, cheaply and easily made compared to professional stand-up gigs or video films. She does everything herself; using a smartphone, she shoots her acts, edits them, and uploads them onto social media. The production requires little or no skill or training in cinematography or filmmaking. Since the advent of digital networks and increase in the use of social media in Nigeria, it is commonplace for Nigerians to use their smartphones to capture humorous moments and upload them on social media, sharing cross-referenced tweets or Instagram posts. Another young woman who also circulates her skits on social media, Maryam Apaokagi (popularly known as Taaooma), disclosed in an interview with CNN that she “didn’t even really know about [video editing]. [She] started making comedy skits because [she] needed some clips [...] to practice editing videos” (Salaudeen 2020:1).

Maraji, a graduate in international relations from Covenant University, plays different characters, highlighting “several childhood memories, everyday experiences, and the reactions of different types of people to the narrated experiences” (Ojomo and Sodeinde 2021:5). She does not use elaborate costumes or makeup to facilitate characterization. She deploys minimal costume pieces when playing male characters; in most of her acts, a cap (“papa’s cap” in Nigerian parlance) is a constant fixture for the role of Daddy Glo, the patriarch. Maraji particularly clarifies that her videos are not meant to draw laughs from her audience or to make them appreciate production aesthetics but to enable people to identify with the issues being fictionalized (in Okiche 2020:2).

One issue that permeates her routines is the tension in a changing world between traditionally minded parents and their children. In her YouTube skit “Nigerian Children Are Phone Repairers” (2020), Maraji presents Daddy and Mummy Glo and Glory, their daughter, at home. (Keep in mind that Maraji plays all three roles.) Daddy Glo is decked in an oversized shirt and a cap that gives him an outlandish appearance. He is old-fashioned, arrogant, and not up to date when it comes to digital tools. The skit begins with him accusing Glory of resetting his cell phone. He demands that she restores it to a setting that is familiar to him.

DADDY GLO: Eh, you!

GLORY: Sir!

DADDY GLO: (*Furiously*) Wetin you touch? I no fit do anything for my phone again, the thing don blank. See the screen. You dey see anything for the screen? [...] Touch am, the thing wey you touch make you touch am back. (Maraji’s World 2020)

Glory takes the phone from him and restores the setting. Rather than thanking Glory, Daddy Glo warns her to stop touching his phone. Glory then advises him to buy *good* phones, and even washing machines, at MGS Stores (a popular store for electronics and appliances). The mention of “washing machine” triggers Daddy Glo’s suspicion that Mummy Glo has sent Glory to trick him into buying a washing machine. He sends Glory back to her mother, who also scolds her for failing to persuade Daddy Glo to buy the machine (Maraji’s World 2020).

Daddy Glo is unable to master his phone and in a rage accuses Glory of messing up his preferred format. He cannot humbly request Glory to help him out. After a brief moment of silence, he concedes arrogantly: “Eh, you! *Touch am.*” His use of pidgin English (a creole used for informal communication in many parts of Nigeria) and the accompanying slang undermine his pretense to knowledge of the phone, making him the object of ridicule. Glory, on the other hand, easily restores the settings with one swipe of her finger across the screen.

As Richard Schechner wrote a decade ago, “the growing global availability of the internet gives speech and visual communication a strong lift over conventional literacy” (2013:4). The decline in



Figure 4. Daddy Glo arrogantly demanding Glory to restore his phone settings. “Nigerian Children Are Phone Repairers,” from Maraji’s World YouTube video, 16 December 2020. www.youtube.com/watch?v=lypv3V84o_0 (Screenshot by TDR)

literacy, although cutting across all layers of culture, especially affects ordinary people. This skit draws the audience’s attention to the disconnect between the predigital generation and the generations that followed. Daddy Glo may or may not be literate, but certainly he has not mastered even the most basic tool of the information age. He is depicted as a cantankerous husband and father who screams at his wife and daughter at the slightest provocation.

In *African Dads in Private vs in Public*, Daddy Glo is watching soccer on TV in the sitting room. He curses and screams at players of his preferred team and describes them as people who play “like say them get belle” (they play like pregnant women) (Maraji’s World 2021a). He points at and scolds the players shown on television as if that will make them play better. As Mummy Glo enters to enquire about what clothes she should prepare for his outing the next day, he flares up and turns the question into a charged altercation. When his wife mentions her intention to watch *her* preferred program, a Bollywood film on Zee World, he curses her: “You dey watch Indian film like say dem dey give am money end of month” (Maraji’s World 2021a). Yet of course Daddy Glo’s obsession with football shows that he is not any different from Mummy Glo and her Bollywood films. He gestures harshly for her to leave, shouting “getat!” (Maraji’s World 2021a). “Getat!” (get out) was coined by Nigerian netizens to evoke laughter and indicates the speaker should not be taken seriously. With his “getat!” Daddy Glo, at the height of his rage, appears both ridiculous and funny.

In the same skit, Daddy Glo is a very calm, kind, and cordial man in the presence of his guests, including a pretentious female guest. They watch a live football match on television. The woman claims to know who all the footballers are but identifies a black African player as Ronaldinho, who is actually a retired Brazilian player. While correcting the guest, Daddy Glo speaks calmly, smiles shyly, and rubs his hands together in an effort to make himself appear as a simple, carefree man. This shows the dual nature of Daddy Glo: he strives to be seen by outsiders as benign whereas he is the chief source of squabbles in his home.

For example, Daddy Glo encourages the guests to watch their preferred television station:

DADDY GLO: (*Smiling*) Abeg which station una wan watch, make I put am for una?

GUEST I: Put am for Zee World.

DADDY GLO: (*Changes the station to Zee World*) Abeg I dey go inside. I wan go do some things.

GUEST II: I hope we're not disturbing you?

DADDY GLO: No, not at all. (*Exits*)

GUEST I: Hei! Mummy Glo, your husband is too nice. He's too considerate...such a nice man, see husband. I love your husband.

(MUMMY GLO opens her mouth in disbelief, looking at the guest) (Maraji's World 2021a).



Figure 5. With mouth hanging open, Mummy Glo gazes at Guest I in disbelief. "African Dads in Public vs in Private," from Maraji's World YouTube video, 23 March 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWdQ4Dgt6-M (Screenshot by TDR)

Earlier, Daddy Glo rejects

Mummy Glo's request to watch

Zee World, which shows Indian films. Here, surprisingly, he gleefully changes the station for his guest. His unexpected hospitality leaves his wife speechless: with her mouth agape, she looks at him in disbelief, as he voluntarily forfeits his favorite football station to please a guest. When Guest I says, "I love your husband," Mummy Glo remains speechless, gazing at her guest intently. Her silence and observation of her husband and guests raise a number of questions: What leads to Daddy Glo's sudden transformation? Why is he so nice to other women and harsh to his wife? Why would her guest say she loves him? Maraji here deploys silence and gestures to communicate multilayered meaning in her acts. This skit satirizes hypocritical men who launder their public image. Maraji adopts a man's appearance by means of costumes, makeup, and characterization, and then makes a man the butt of the joke.

Maraji's skits are sponsored by various brands and services that face the challenge of securing ad space in the clutter of social media. The significance of deploying humor in advertising lies in its capacity to message in an understandable, enjoyable, and acceptable way—with a smile, as it were. In social media, humor easily diverts attention from content toward fun and laughter. And placing ads with humorous content serves the same purpose. James M. Barry and John Gironda, in a seminal essay, argue that humor tacitly affects the influence of adjacent ads on social media: "[i]n effect, the levity taps into an emotional sentiment that sets the stage for marketers to spark an inspirational appeal for their brands in an era of infobesity" (2018). Insofar as social media fosters multicontinental interactions and participation in comic content, comedians such as Maraji are at the forefront of this movement toward a borderless audience.

The skit "Nigerian Children Are Phone Repairers" is a sponsored advertisement for MGS Phone stores. Maraji repeatedly mentions the company all through the skit and blames Daddy Glo's problematic phone on an unnamed store. Similarly, "African Dads in Private vs in Public" (2021) advertises a special Covid-19 price slash offer made by DSTV, a sub-Saharan African direct broadcast satellite service owned by and operated by MultiChoice. In the skit, Maraji advertises the price slash for DSTV decoders offered to new subscribers.

It is also noteworthy that in this skit Maraji chooses soccer as the television program Daddy Glo watches, drawing on Nigeria's national love of the game. Most Nigerians are soccer enthusiasts; it is the country's number one sporting activity. The skit exploits a familiar, relatable situation to get Nigerians to take advantage of DSTV promotional offers that promise to maximize their enjoyment of the upcoming UEFA Europa League soccer.

Maraji also addresses the problem of religious hypocrisy. In "How African Mothers Prepare to Talk to Their Husbands" (2021c), the unhealthy relationship between Daddy Glo and Mummy Glo is exaggerated. She anoints her lips and prays to God to allow "her mouth" to speak effectively to Daddy Glo.



MUMMY GLO: O Lord, my God, as I'm about to talk to him now, Father Lord, cover my mouth with the blood of Jesus. (*Rubs olive oil on her lips.*) I cover my mouth with the blood of Jesus. Make my matter no tire am. Make im no quick vex, make im hear me well. (Maraji's World 2021c)

Figure 6. Mummy Glo anointing her lips with oil. "How African Mothers Prepare to Talk to Their Husbands," from Maraji's World YouTube video, 2 September 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVH_UNmho9w (Screenshot by TDR)

During the conversation, they both flare up at each other and exchange insults. Rather than control her anger and work on

her relationship with Daddy Glo, Mummy Glo anoints her lips and prays not to sound offensive or boring to her husband. Unlike some other parts of the world where olive oil is used for cooking, in Nigeria it is widely used for anointing, deliverance, blessing, and other spiritual purposes. When she rubs it on her lips and sprinkles some on the floor, Mummy Glo is sanctifying her mouth and delivering herself from every "spirit" responsible for her frequent disagreements with Daddy Glo. During the prayer, a popular Yoruba Christian song used for aggressive prayers is played in the background to elicit laughter. Surprisingly, Mummy Glo soon becomes incensed and engages in an altercation with her husband. With eyes filled with rage, she brandishes the bottle of olive oil as a possible weapon, pointing it at Daddy Glo. During the squabble, she warns her husband and threatens to beat him up:

MUMMY GLO: No dey shout for me, I don tell you make you no dey shout for me o. You go dey form man of house. Man of house wey no fit teach im wife something, na man be that? (*To Glory*) Warn am o. No be before wey im go dey shout for me. I dey beat o... (*To Glory*) Warn him. I will no longer stand his yelling at me. I do beat... (Maraji's World 2021c)

A fan of Maraji describes Mummy Glo as "a woman that deploys physical methods when the spiritual fails" (in Amaefula 2021a). This squabble shows that Mummy Glo's spiritual mood can't last; that prayers are pointless for matters that require human effort. As Kemi and Chijioke note, "contemporary Nigerian society is laden with many social maladies and religion has not been able to proffer solutions" (2017:151). The rise of religious organizations with their varied beliefs and modes of worship confines the average Nigerian to a medieval mindset. In the capitalist market, different churches compete for members, promoting messages that tell believers they need not work to improve themselves because God will help them with miracles. The result is that many Nigerians like Mummy Glo increasingly believe that God, not hard work, will solve their problems. Hence, she applies olive oil on her lips and blesses her mouth so as not to speak offensively—a comic scene ridiculing zealotry. The satire extends to Daddy Glo's failure to encourage peace in his home. His wife praying prior to their meeting that they will not quarrel depicts Daddy Glo as a horrible husband. This skit is sponsored by OCTAFX, an online trading app mentioned in the skit.

Maraji mimics and mocks many different kinds of people. She began her comedy career by creating lip-synch video clips of popular songs in Nigeria. The popularity of these videos emboldened Maraji to mimic all kinds of Nigerians: from nurses, cab drivers, and aggressive mothers guiding their children through daily assignments, to scared or impatient airplane passengers and successful businessmen. Her impersonations range from the kind, chatty, and friendly to the braggadocios and brutish. Maraji keeps up with what is trending on platforms such as Zee World and demonstrates Bollywood dance steps and delivers comedic dialogue in tones thick with an Indian accent. In all of these, she mocks social foibles, including violence in the guise of parenting, Nigerian women's increasing addiction to Zee World,



Figure 7. Mummy Glo, quarreling with Daddy Glo, pointing at him with the bottle of olive oil. “How African Mothers Prepare to Talk to Their Husbands,” from Maraji’s World YouTube video, 2 September 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVH_UNmho9w (Screenshot by TDR)

and noisy nosy cab drivers and passengers. In one skit a loquacious businessman foists his unsolicited business card on a female Indian passenger, to a background song that derides fraud. The naivete of the Indian woman together with the businessman’s excitement over the new “client” satirizes the pervasive internet fraud in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Maraji performs her mimicry masterfully yet in ways that are relatable to ordinary Nigerians—the key to her popularity.

Flipping the Script

Maraji and Subversive Humor

Subversive humor deploys and then subverts what is generally known or anticipated. Undercutting socially expected behavior of a particular group of people is a major mechanism of subversion in comedy. By presenting what is known, the comic invites her audience to rethink or have a conversation about the issues raised when these practices or attitudes go unexamined (Hurley et al. 2011:81). On the other hand, when one takes the “[comic’s] act at face-value, their interpretation can misconstrue the underlying critiques as reification” (Votruba 2018:34). Thus, a firm grasp of the undertone of a comic’s act is at the core of subversive humor. When a female comic utilizes the disadvantaged status of women to contest hegemonic structures, while eliciting amusement, “the comic may make [...] herself the butt of a joke, but in so doing simultaneously externalizes some cultural incongruity or imperfection as the target of the audience’s laughter’s corrective capacity” (Meier and Schmitt 2017:xxiii). A comic might show and use as tools of social criticism the constraints a discriminatory society has imposed on her. Critiques of this type are mediated by irony, enabling the audience to understand that the character portraits performatively embody new meanings that not only attack prejudice and oppression but additionally subvert men’s dominance in comedy.

Prior to the introduction of female comics on social media, most negative stereotypes of women were embodied by the female characters in the joke narratives of male stand-up comedians. Male Nigerian stand-up comedians mostly dwell on jokes that denigrate women, as Adetunji affirms: “the female is the butt of the majority of the often negatively valued jokes” (2013:10). Interestingly, Nigerian women comics who started to do stand-up comedy in the mid-1990s attained fame and gained industry accolades by caricaturing female characters. Particularly, Olufunke Aboosed

Ogunboye (known onstage as Lepacious Bose) based her jokes on self-deprecation—she regularly body-shamed herself and other women who are also large. This practice fits into Krefling’s view that female comics become known and attract sponsored gigs when “their comic persona capitalizes on stereotypes about women, reinforcing a highly socialized demoralizing narrative about women’s incompetence, their frailty, or obsessions with romance, flowers and the color pink” (2014:127). However, the advent of women such as Maraji on social media changed the scene. By creating skits that speak honestly about their own experiences and the experiences of other women, these comics place themselves in a dominant position, flipping the script of the Nigerian “boys’ club” for comedians (Okiche 2020:1). Rather than denigrate women, social media comedians such as Maraji, Oshisko Twins, Emmanuella, and Taaooma, among others, are evolving new ways to succeed by focusing on social issues, trending subjects, and by ridiculing the excesses of men and women alike.

Through sponsored promotions of brands and services, Maraji flips women stereotypes in her acts by featuring Daddy Glo as serially quarrelsome. In “How African Mothers Prepare to Talk to Their Husbands” (2021), Mummy Glo prays for a peaceful conversation. This portrait reverses the position of women as heroines, making them instead, heroines as victims. The opening scenario of the skit shows a peaceful Mummy Glo in prayer, but Daddy Glo’s incessant yelling leads to Mummy Glo’s punchline, “I dey beat o” (Maraji’s World 2021c). While religious satire is one of the undercurrents here, Mummy Glo’s anger serves the dual purpose of standing up to her abusive husband and making the joke rather than being its butt. The punchline turns the tables. Logan Murray clarifies that a punchline is “an afterthought, a continuation of the previous thought; it is not a contradiction” (2015:26); and Arline Karen Votruba notes that it must “take a different direction that shocks the audience and evokes laughter” (2018:19).

For a comedic enactment to elicit laughter, it needs a setup for the joke. These setups are usually brief and thrive on stereotypes reinforced by nonverbal cues in the *mise-en-scène*—costumes, makeup, and lighting, among others. Mummy Glo is presented as an average Nigerian Christian mother; her prayer life reflects the general belief that mothers are the spiritual pillars of the home. These assumptions conform with traditional Nigerian values that are familiar to the audience. This skit disrupts these prevailing values. “Thus, all jokes have subversive elements in that the goal is for the comic to undercut audience expectations with something surprising”—a punchline (20). These expectations are the unspoken segments of a setup that audience members voluntarily “fill with assumptions allow[ing them] to be surprised by something other than what [they] assumed” (Dean 2000:6). Based on the setup in Maraji’s “How African Mothers Prepare to Talk to Their Husbands,” the audience’s expectations of Mummy Glo are overturned when the stereotype of a “praying mum” is shattered and displaced by an aggressive woman who “beats her husband” (Maraji’s World 2021c). Here the comic draws our attention to the widely accepted belief in male prerogatives that include demonizing women as difficult and quarrelsome (Amaefula 2021b), and then shatters these convictions by giving an out-of-character punchline. By so doing, Maraji enacts a challenge to the normative sociopolitical structures of Nigeria; her character asserts herself against her husband. She embodies comedy’s capacity for “re-evaluations, reversals and replacements of the status quo” (Nwankwo 2021:1).

Maraji—and comedians like her—no longer need to fashion their jokes to fit the mold of self-deprecation, feeding into already established prejudices against women. Maraji and other social media comics have found that social media is where they can shatter stereotypes against women. This trend to deconstruct societal assumptions and expectations concerning women has undoubtedly laid the foundation for the future of comedy in Nigeria.

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