

COMEDY AS A DISCURSIVE EXCHANGE FOR SOCIAL
CHANGE: A STUDY OF THE SOCIAL THEMES OF PAPA
AJASCO AND ITS INTERPRETATION BY NIGERIAN
AUDIENCE

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Abstract

Comedy is any form of social exchange that elicits laughter as responses. Characteristically, it generates simultaneously both pleasure and power. In other words, comedy as a form of funniness involves breaking of rules and making the rules so that correct behaviour is implicitly instated (Purdie, 2003). It is on this basis that this study investigated the discursive process through which Papa Ajasco comedy series condemn some social behaviour and signify them as bad or inappropriate in funny but strong terms. Therefore, the study examined some purposefully selected current series of Papa Ajasco on Nigerian television with a view to identifying and explaining the pattern of condemned social behaviours or affairs of this world in the comedy. It also determined the discursive means by which the social behaviours are condemned as transgressions. Essentially, the study sought to understand how randomly selected audience of 50 members, who regularly view Papa Ajasco series on television, interpret the discursive exchange and jokes in the comedy. This was done through an in-depth interview that allowed the audience to air their views spontaneously. The study found that Papa Ajasco series indeed appeal to a majority of Nigerians with its unique capacity to provide high spirit that relaxes their minds and provide them with escape valves with which they relieve tensions of work and life. But, beyond this, the series, in melodramatic forms, condemns some social vices and behaviours that are been deeply rooted as ways of life in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the discursive power of the comedy series in condemning the behaviours

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is interpreted by the audience mostly as jokes. So, the didactic benefit of the series is mitigated by the agency of the audience who interprets the language, meaning and themes of the comedy series as nothing but just jokes and relaxation. The introduction of the features of sitcom does not even change the interpretation pattern; rather it attacks audience attention more to its funniness.

Keywords :Comedy, Papa Ajasco , Social change, Discursive process, Social behaviour , Nigerian audience

Introduction

Comedy is any form of social exchange that elicits laughter as responses. Characteristically, it generates simultaneously both pleasure and power. In other words, comedy as a form of funniness involves breaking of rules and making the rules so that correct behaviour is implicitly instated (Purdie, 2003). It is on this basis that this study investigated the discursive process through which Papa Ajasco comedy series condemn some social behaviour and signify them as bad or inappropriate in funny but strong terms.

Papa Ajasco Comedy Series

Papa Ajasco comedy series started as far back as 1982 when Wale Adenuga came out with a film called Papa Ajasco. It was Nigeria's first comedy film in English. Before then, we had Yoruba comedy by dramatists such as Adeyemi Afolayan (Ade Love), I-sho Pepper (Ishola Ogunsola), Hubert Ogunde, Baba Sala (Moses Adejumo). But the first comedy film in English came from Adenuga. It was Papa Ajasco. And it was taken throughout Nigeria, West Africa, and Europe. It did very well. In 1995, Adenuga came out with a home video called Binta My Daughter. Papa Ajasco film came out of the Ikebe Super Magazine characters while Binta My Daughter came out of the characters of Binta Magazine. In 1997, Nigerians started having Papa Ajasco comedy series on television. And it has been like that till date.

Producer/Manufacturer

Wale Adenuga, MFR, 65, is the chairman of Wale Adenuga Productions (WAP) and producer of Papa Ajasco comedy series. He is a former cartoonist/publisher, and currently a TV series producer, with sizzlers such as Super Story, Nnena and Friends, This Life, under his belt. Before the emergence of the Nollywood film industry, Adenuga had released the celluloid movie, Papa Ajasco, which was based on the main character in Ikebe Super in 1983. Papa Ajasco made history

as the first English comedy in an industry which had been dominated by Yoruba productions. Then a film version of *Binta*, re-entitled *Binta My Daughter* was released in 1995. A year later, the television series *Papa Ajasco* (formerly *The Ajasco Family*) was aired on Nigerian Television Network (NTA) for the viewing pleasure of Nigerians. With the burning desire to provide qualitative education, Adenuga and his wife, Ehinwenma founded *Binta International School* in Lagos. He also opened the *Pencil Film and Television Institute (PEFTI)* now a leading institute in the art of film production, directing, and cinematography.

Characterization

There are six main characters in the sitcom, *Papa Ajasco*, and they are:

1. **Papa Ajasco:**
He is considered the head of the family. He mixes a great sense of humour with bombastic diction and usage of English. He runs into trouble always. His bald head, big tummy and stylishly tied wrapper are his most unique features.
2. **Mama Ajasco:**
She is the wife of Papa Ajasco and a semi-literate woman who can barely speak good English. She is as troublesome as she is meddlesome.
3. **Ajasco:**
A dullard whose sense of mischief is legendary, he performs abysmally always in school and most often comes last in the class. His fez cap is his distinguishing characteristic.
4. **Boy Alinco:**
Boy Alinco is the skinny dude with long head whose penchant for speaking raw riddles is legendary. He is well known for his monkey jacket.
5. **Pa James:**
Pa James is the illiterate poor old man whose foolishness is his most striking feature. He runs into trouble always and speaks pidgin with dexterity.
6. **Miss Pepeiyé:**
Miss Pepeiyé is another skinny lady who lures men into her traps to extort them. She also runs into troubles sometimes, too.

The Cast

In July 2006, there was no doubt that lovers of the popular weekly television comedy, *Papa Ajasco and Company* were shocked that the original cast were changed. Mr Wale Adenuga, Producer and Chief

Executive of Wale Adenuga Productions- creators of the comedy, has listed reasons for asking majority of the cast to leave, adding that he meant no harm with the decision.

Before February 2006, the original cast were

- Abiodun Ayoyinka (Papa Ajasco);
- Bayo Bankole (Boy Alinco);
- Jumoke Momoh (Mama Ajasco);
- Miss Pepeiye;
- Mr Jimoh Olasehinde(Pa James) and;
- the naughty kid, Ajasco (Ebunsayo).

But suddenly, some stopped featuring in the TV series. Only Mr. Olasehinde Jimoh (Pa James) was retained. Ironically, virtually all these actors have become household names with their individual roles, in addition to creating large followership for the show, which made its debut on television nine years ago. However, the artistes were replaced by another set of artistes including,

- Femi Ogunrombi (Papa Ajasco)
- Victor Oyebode (Boy Alinco),
- Patricia Mokwunye (Mama Ajasco) and
- Bola Sowunmi as Miss Pepeiye.

Issues Treated/Themes Addressed in Papa Ajasco

The television sitcom has over the years addressed societal issues through the use of humour and it has tried to effect changes in people's psyche and their conception of certain societal realities.

Issues treated in the television series over the years include:

- Marriage and marital conflicts
- corruption
- honesty and other virtues
- poverty and empowerment
- education and its values
- Women and Identity formation
- The Nigerian police and security concerns amongst others.

Problem Statement

The study examined some purposefully selected current series of Papa Ajasco on Nigerian television with a view to identifying and explaining the pattern of condemned social behaviours or affairs of this world represented in the comedy. It also determined the discursive

means by which the social behaviours are condemned as transgressions. Essentially, the study sought to understand how randomly selected audience, who regularly watch Papa Ajasco series on television, interpreted the discursive exchange and jokes in the comedy.

Research Questions

1. What are the major social issues that Papa Ajasco re-presents or condemns in its series?
2. What is the discursive means through which Papa Ajasco series re-presents or condemns the social issues?
3. How do the audiences or regular viewers of Papa Ajasco series interpret its re-presentations or condemnation of the (negative) social issues?

Literature Review

Comedy is an interpretative device through which insight is made into the lives of people as a form of cultural criticism ((Koziski, 1997). It is, indeed, a social commentary (Mintz, 1985) and communal revelation (Kirby, 1974). It is what Daniel Smith (2014) called comedic sociology, which consists in observing, recording and dramatising the contradictions, absurdities and incongruities of social life (Koziski, 1997). As a comedic sociology, comedy rests upon the comic's ability to provide sociological observations which illustrate wider socio-cultural realities. In other words, the contents of comedy, just like any other forms of arts, mirror the realities found in the organisation of social life (Witkin, 2003). This is to say that comedy uses jest to illustrate the realities of the social life. Drawing from King's (2004) hermeneutic critique of life, comedy draws out the limits of our understanding and comprehension of life. So, to make fun is to have understood the contents of social life and show their limited conceptions, their internal contradictions and inadequacy through humour.

Thus, a comedian and his or her themes might appear silly and funny, yet, he or she passes across a message about the situation of our lived experiences which require a change. To this end, Smith (2014) gives a succinct description of the role and function of comedy in society as thus: comedy can highlight the hidden narratives of life. It is the opportunity for a blind comic to convey a unifying piece of storytelling to a room full of randomly assembled people and bring them together in empathy, interest and finally, hopefully, laughter of recognition; for narrative, whilst enabling the audience to enjoy the perspective of the Other, a life view of the seemingly alien, can paradoxically show the humanness, the sameness, the ordinariness of this world view.

Meanwhile, comedy is discursive. As a discursive exchange, it presents alternatives that the audiences are called to consider. However, because it presents the alternative desired through jest or joke, it has been established that comedy is lesser and less effective form of social change. This, according to Turner (1988), might be because comedy, like the stand-up comedy, is always subversive of society.

Methodology

This study adopted narrative analysis to examine and explain the pattern of condemned social behaviours or affairs in Nigerian society. Five series of the comedy were randomly selected for the narrative analysis. On the other hand, in-depth interview was adopted to understand how viewers interpret Papa Ajasco comedy series. Fifty respondents that cut across various levels of education, ethnicities, social economic status and religion were purposively recruited or selected for the in-depth interview.

Analysis

Art is life; art mirrors life and this is evident in many works of art that litter the public space today. The contents therein mirror the society together with its failings; its dynamics; its beauty; its imperfections and so on. Of course, certain socio-cultural constructs that give the society its shape are also explored. Invariably, we cannot doubt the fact that the essence of art – any work of art – is to deconstruct and give meaning to certain complex issues in society. Papa Ajasco sitcom is, thus, not an exception.

Nowadays, one can find as many love affairs-turned-into-marriages and an equal number of marriages turned sour as well. So many factors could be responsible for the destruction of the love that flutters in any relationship/marriage. Many a time, in the latter, it could be financial troubles, infidelity, and incompatibility, to mention a few, but can one rule out influence or interference of influences (both internal and external) and its attendant problems? Such is the case of Papa Ajasco in the series "The Polygamist." In "The Polygamist", Papa Ajasco's mother, Maami, threatens to marry another wife for her son, Papa Ajasco. This, she claims, is due to Mama Ajasco's failure to give her more grandchildren. She even brings a concoction from the village and claims it would increase Mama Ajasco's chances of getting pregnant. As expected, Mama Ajasco refuses to drink the concoction made from a bizarre assortment of ingredients and this causes an issue. Papa Ajasco who does not see that as a big deal takes a sip. Shortly after this, he becomes unconscious.

Eventually, Papa Ajasco succumbs to Maami's directive to marry another wife when he learns of their royal lineage. By right, he would be the next king of their community and to qualify for this, he must have at least three children. One fateful day, Maami arrives, alongside her best friend's daughter as Papa Ajasco's new wife. Much to Mama Ajasco's chagrin, Papa Ajasco could not resist the 'gorgeous beauty queen' - Pepeiye. That very point marks the genesis of the intrigues around which the drama revolves - how Papa Ajasco would later metamorphose into a polygamist and how he would find it difficult to contain the excesses of his two wives.

Papa Ajasco becomes a polygamist, owing to the pressure from his mother for more children. This is however the beginning of trouble in Papa Ajasco's household. Because of the many troubles under his roof, Papa Ajasco seeks the advice of Pa James, an "experienced polygamist" who advises him that if the situation does not get any better, he should marry yet another wife, a 3rd wife, a 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th and as many as possible till peace will be restored in his home. In the meantime, the quarrels between Mama Ajasco and Pepeiye aren't over yet. Mama Ajasco who has been busy with house chores while Pepeiye does nothing, finally confronts her on this and what happens? A fight ensues; Papa Ajasco who tries to stop them gets beaten up as well. With the duo of Mama Ajasco and Pepeiye under the same roof, Papa Ajasco is only beginning to get more than what he bargained for. And as is typical of the riotous family, the intrigues, commotion, kerfuffle and drama drags on and on, with Papa Ajasco becoming confused at every point in time in the house.

Discussion

One core issue the sit-com, treats is the complex and often controversy-laden issue of polygamy. Polygamy is one of the most complicated family set-ups in African societies. Interestingly, what the producer of this sit-com tries to achieve is to look at the intrigues in a polygamous set-up, especially within the context of the implication it has on peaceful co-existence among members of the large, polygamous family. As expected, all of these were delivered with humour.

In the series, we see Papa Ajasco trying to strike a balance in his interaction with the two wives - Mama Ajasco and Miss Peipeye - while desperately avoiding actions that may create fracas among them. However, the rivalry between the wives is so intense that Papa Ajasco's moves are not enough to make peace reign and it is rancour through and through. Another theme explored in the sit-com is the peculiarity of the African royalty system. In the series, Papa Ajasco was pushed

into polygamy because of the dictate of his people's culture which makes it mandatory for him to give birth to at least three children before he can become king. This, quite interestingly, contrasts with what obtains elsewhere, especially in Europe and Americas. Thus, beyond the laughter and the sardonic humour, what the movie also showcases is the peculiarity of African traditional kingship system and how it can shape the life of a heir apparent –even to the point of acting against his own desires, whims and caprices.

Another issue addressed in the sit-com is the issue of crises and controversies portrayed as being integral parts of a polygamous family. In the series, we can see that as much as Papa Ajasco tries to maintain equilibrium amidst his two rancorous wives, he is always beaten to pulp by both wives whenever disagreement ensues. It gets to its crescendo when he fails to get a reasonable advice from Pa James, his confidant and an experienced polygamist. When Pa James advises him to pick a third wife and if the controversies continue, he should pick the fourth, the fifth, and the sixth and so on, it was an unconscious indictment of the association of polygamy. He unconsciously brings to the fore, the simple fact that controversy can never be divorced from any marriage outside monogamy.

Audience Interpretation

Ironically, the viewers of the sitcom interviewed did not understand it beyond its humour and comedy. In other words, the Nigerian audiences of the sitcom do not derive any meaning from the comedy except the humour and laughter it provides. The strong meaning woven around the social issues the comedy attempts to condemn is lost to the audiences who prioritize the channel of humour through which the comedy passes its meanings. As it is encapsulated by one of the interviewees, "Papa Ajasco is nothing but a comedy to many of its fans like me; it does not have meaning beyond the laughter it provides." Another interviewee, who put this opinion more depth asserted that: Papa Ajasco is a comedy and nothing more. It is a fabrication of the producer whose main intention is to make people laugh and he does it regularly and commendably. So when I watch Papa Ajasco, as I do not miss it every week, my main purpose is to laugh and not to be evangelized. As a matter of fact, there is no any reality in the comedy and many viewers do not watch it for any purpose other than humour. Any social issue the comedy tries to condemn or valorise does not sink with the viewers like me. I take it as an entertainment that provides relaxation and good laughter to take off stress of the day from me. I think any media content that aspires to change the society must not come like jokes or humour as Papa Ajasco does; otherwise it will not sink – its meaning will be misinterpreted.

It is not surprising that the interviewee quoted above was quite revealing because he was an elite- a university lecturer. Notwithstanding, he represents the view of most of the regular viewers of Papa Ajasco irrespective of their educational level. The opinion touches on the kernel of the uses and gratification that asserts that audience consume different media content for different purposes (Katz, 1978). The interviewee also knowingly or unknowingly touched on Hall's (1982) encoding and decoding model that establishes that audiences of media messages do most times re-appropriate the meanings of media messages to the extent that they do sometimes reject the preferred meanings intended by the producer of the messages.

The most striking point in the above quote is the recommendation that "any media content that aspires to change the society must not come like jokes, otherwise it will not sink or its meaning will be misinterpreted". This is in line with the proposition of message production theorists (Greene, 1997).

Conclusion

The study found that Papa Ajasco series appeal to a majority of Nigerians with its unique capacity to provide high spirit that relaxes their minds and provide them with escape valves from the tension of work and life. But, more than this, the series, in a melodramatic form, condemns some social vices and behaviours that are deeply rooted as ways of life in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the discursive power of the comedy series in condemning the behaviours is interpreted by the audience mostly as jokes. So the didactic benefit of the series is mitigated by the agency of the audience who interprets the language, meaning and themes of the comedy series as nothing but just jokes and relaxation. The introduction of the features of sitcom does not even change the interpretative pattern; rather it attracts audience attention more to its funniness.

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