

5 *“God Too Laughs and We Can Laugh Too”: The Ambivalent Power of Comedy Performances in the Church*

At a church vigil where members had gathered for a night of prayer and worship, where music ministers and prayers warriors would wage a battle against the kingdom of hell, a stand-up comedian too waited in the wings to be called on the church altar. This comedian, Aboki4Christ, had performed in many churches over the years and had honed his skills in making God’s people laugh. Still, each performance was a different experience and the character of every congregation had to be properly gauged to determine the kind of jokes that would tickle them. People had to laugh, but equally important to him was that people go back to their homes with a moral lesson from the jokes along with a feeling of refreshment from having been in the house of God. In his later retelling of that night at Winners Chapel, Calabar, Aboki4Christ said,

The church vigil was titled “Operation fire for fire.” That was supposed to be a night of prayer where you fire the devil and his demons out of your life. So I did a joke about the devil to prepare the mind of the people to understand the nothingness of the devil, how minute the devil can be. We tend to exaggerate the devil so much. We tend to give him the accolade he doesn’t really deserve. Everything that happens, oh, it is the devil! We ascribe so much to the devil even the devil gets surprised that he wonders, can I do this thing they said I did? . . . I typically make jokes to belittle the devil and let him see he is insignificant in the life of the child of God.¹

Unlike the ’90s when drama groups like Mount Zion Faith Ministries International performed inside the churches, entertainment has shifted to mostly comedy performed during special programs such as vigils, anniversary celebrations, conventions, and crusades. Stand-up comedy, unlike stage drama, is easier to stage because it requires fewer

¹ Personal interview.

resources to put up in the church. A solo performer, or a pair, with a mere microphone, would fit into an interlude between regular church activities and perform before the congregation much more readily than drama artists. As one of the comedians noted to me, they also make people laugh, unlike church drama artists who are so bent on teaching morality lessons they “always get too serious.”² Some of these artists are also well-known comedians who already perform in the entertainment industry while others grew up in Pentecostal churches and turned into comedians. Their primary audience is thus church congregations although they also perform at secular gatherings.³ Both categories of comedians are thus “crossover artists.” However, given how fused both secular and religious spheres in Nigeria have become, both sets are easier to categorize as artists who go almost wherever they are invited to perform for an audience.

For ease of referencing in this work, I will refer to performance genre as “gospel comedy” and everyone who performs in a church as a “gospel comedian” throughout this chapter.⁴ My preoccupation here to look beyond the function of humor to ruffle and rupture, and instead at its performance as part of the dynamic construct of power identity through a balance of public affirmation and private contestation. As stated in the previous chapter, the proliferation of internet technology has exposed Pentecostalism and its powerful leaders to a lot of ridicule and satire that cannot be mitigated due to the endlessly open nature of social media. Understanding the power of mockery, churches co-opted the business of jest-making by inviting popular comedians to perform. That way, they get to retain some level of control over the production of the jokes circulating in the public sphere. When a comedian has appeared in a church, stood on the altar to perform, and devoted comic material toward validating the man of God, such an artist would be hesitant to make jokes ridiculing the pastor or the church. I should also note that the trend of gospel comedy is not limited to the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria – it extends to some of their branches in North America, particularly in the United States, and the United Kingdom.⁵ Nigerian

² Personal interview. ³ Taiwo, “From Jagua to Ali Baba.”

⁴ Egbo E. Imo attributes the rise of gospel comedy to the proliferation of churches. Due to the high number of churches in the national sphere, the church easily becomes the space where emerging artists gravitate for their career launch.

⁵ The diaspora churches either use comedians in their local communities or invite popular ones from Nigeria to perform in their churches, particularly during special services and celebrations.

churches abroad either use a local Nigerian comedian affiliated to their church or fly in a comedian from Nigeria.

When they perform in church, comedians also do the cultural work of mockery that, though it might satirize faith practices, also mitigates the jokes in such a way as to ultimately reinforce the power and authority of the church leadership. From my interviews and assessment, most church members who go to church believing in the power of the man of God’s anointing and its potential for their transformation do not leave church believing that either their pastor’s or their own power identity has suffered because the comedian caricatured what they believed. They mostly consider it harmless fun. Not everyone is on board with this practice of comedy in church though. One of the most notable criticisms of the practice came from filmmaker Mike Bamiloye (see Chapter 1), who tried to call people’s attention to what he saw as a problem,

For a long while I have questioned . . . the fact that the comedians brought in are allowed to make jokes of scriptures, the Blood of Jesus, speaking in tongues, the throne of grace etc. AND WE SIT THERE LAUGHING! What are we laughing at? What is funny? Mocking God and Christ and the Holy Spirit and the Word is funny???? We hear of other religions where they are obsessed with protecting the image of their Leader and we gleefully allow people to MOCK our Leader JESUS CHRIST and the Holy Spirit and thereby indirectly MOCKING GOD!!! They look at us with disdain because we are BAD AMBASSADORS of our faith!⁶

Those who disagreed with Bamiloye reminded him that when he started taking drama performances to the church in the early ’90s, some people also kicked against staging plays in church. They saw it as a mockery of God’s sacred space. If the church could advance despite drama performances that Bamiloye once staged in church, some professional comedians told him, it would not collapse because a comedian stepped on the altar to make jokes.⁷

As these comedians perform in churches, they do important cultural work that complicates the notions of the disruptive power that cultural studies have attributed to comedy and laughter. For instance,

⁶ www.pulse.ng/entertainment/celebrities/mike-bamiloye-actor-thinks-comedy-has-no-place-in-church/7vrglqk

⁷ <https://dailypost.ng/2016/12/13/ried-not-sin-invite-comedians-church-enenche-enenche-replies-mike-bamiloye/>

a secularizing logic is evident in how Aboki4Christ understands and plays his role as a comedian whose performance stage includes the churches. He considers most of the misfortunes that Pentecostal churches, with their fixation on the demonic and the occult, attribute to the devil as a dubious fantasy of Christians who either want to or even have already relinquished personal responsibility for their failures. His jokes about the devil are to reflect such thinking to those people. They are free to hold their views of demonic figures, but by turning the misfortunes they attribute to spectral forces into comedy material, he downplays the force of its power. The devil as a foreboding specter already haunts the Christian imagination, but armed with jokes, he tries to lessen its effect. By subjecting the congregation's impression of demonic powers to the collective censure of contempt and laughter, he undermines the paralyzing belief in the devil and points them toward more rational modes of thinking about their social condition. Through jokes, he challenges their received knowledge of supernatural causality and subtly urges them to confront their social issues without necessarily attributing them to metaphysical factors.

If comedy were an effective weapon of social transformation as often stated, this effort would elevate the gospel comedian into a vanguard for moral and social progress. On the other hand, such an abrupt conclusion about the role of a comedian could be an overstatement of the transformative mission of the comedian given that the conditions under which their comedy gets produced makes them orient its content toward social conservatism. This is not to say that every aspect of gospel comedy has a conservative agenda or that this is all there is to it. It could also politicize issues in a way that opens the door for more progressive thought. For instance, by “joking with the devil” in church, the comedian also alleviates the fear of those who see the leisure and pleasure in bringing comedians to the church space as a worldly distraction leading the people of God to spiritual famine. Instead, he suggests that through his anti-devil jokes, Christians get to relax. They should also not have to fear making themselves vulnerable to demonic attacks because laughing at jokes in the church is not a surrender of their spiritual vigilance, but a reiteration of it in other ways. Aboki4Christ's perspective on the supernatural is to help people transcend their taught ideas of the role of the devil in their lives, attenuate the terror it stimulates in their imagination, and challenge them to look beyond supernatural myths to solve existential problems.

By redefining the power of the devil and pushing people to look at other ideological alternatives, he is opening their minds to make room for critical doubt in their beliefs.

While scholarly studies have examined other aspects of worship that are considered entertaining like music and dances, comedy in churches is rarely considered because it is still relatively recent and uncommon outside the Pentecostal church circles.⁸ Jokes, we know, are funny because of their subversive nature – they can distort the view of reality and make us question accepted perspectives. They are weapons in the hands of those who use them, whether the performer on the stage or the audience whose laughter completes the act. Laughter has political uses that can either be considered therapeutic for those seeking to escape the violence of their postcolonial condition and at the same time, it can make the pain more tolerable.⁹ The reflexive insight the dispensed jokes grant – at least when delivered by a virtuosic performer – clarifies contradictions and identifies the gaps in reality. Gospel comedy brings some nuances to comedy’s putative power to expose the artificiality of social constructions of reality because it throws up the question of how the things of God become a “laughing matter,” and how the church affords the distancing necessary for them to laugh at sacred concepts and practices.

At first glance, comic performances seem incongruous to the sacred construct of the church, and many critics of the practice state as much. As spontaneous combustion of human emotions, laughter can both be eruptive and disruptive, and a violation of the hallowedness of worship. Laughing at jokes shared on the church altar feels somewhat contradictory to the discipline and self-restraint that religion typically prescribes. From the perspective of the diversity of church practices through time (apart from drama, other entertainment forms have included choreographed dances), stand-up comedy in church might be transgressive but laughing in church is neither novel nor radical. Religion provides the material for comedy, either to ridicule the faith or to find some comical aspects in its practices. Ritual performances and certain religious experiences both produce a *jouissance* that makes

⁸ Carl, “Music, Ritual and Media in Charismatic Religious Experience in Ghana”; Kalu, “Holy Praiseco”; Patsiaoura, “Transcending Distinctions between Religious and Secular Musicianship”; Ryan, “Negotiations of Faith and Space in Memphis Music.”

⁹ Afolayan, “Hilarity and the Nigerian Condition.”

people laugh (such as the time they talk about “laughing in the spirit”).¹⁰ Comedy and laughter are as consistent with faith practices as they contradict it.

People who have tried to explain comedy in church look into their religious texts for instances of people laughing and find a theological justification for mirth in a church. The gospel comedians and the pastors (at least the ones who accept the trend) that I worked with for this chapter do not think of laughter and faith as merely conterminous. Their rationalization of laughter in the church is that it is intrinsic to worship and quite consistent with Pentecostal theology. “God too laughs,” several of the comedians say, “and since we are made in His image, we laugh too. We *can* laugh too.” To clarify this further, they pointed me toward the Bible where God’s laughter was recorded in the book of Psalm 2:4, 37:13, 59:8. In the first verse, God was laughing derisively at those plotting against his anointed. In the second verse, God was laughing at the wicked who were scheming against the righteous but did not know that their own end was imminent. In the third verse, the Psalmist attributes laughter to God and sets the stage for an impending victory. The three verses where God laughed had one thing in common: presumption of their human abilities and power over the weak was the joke, and God’s laughter was the response. God’s laughter was a precursor to unleashing divine judgment on those who victimized His children. The Psalmist narrator uses God’s laughter as a prayer and pre-emption of an imminent victory against the presumptive oppressor who underestimates the weaker party’s ability to marshal God’s power in their favor. What does this scriptural model that posits laughter as triumph and conquest portend for Pentecostals who make jokes in church? If laughter is a form of divine judgment, what – and whose – is the victory?

The question of who or what is defeated when comedians describe their performance using Scriptures that gesture toward victory calls for an exploration of how they imagine their roles as performer in the church, and how that perception could structure their attitude to their work. Critical studies of comedy have argued about the expansive functions of social and political criticism, therapy/catharsis, strategic

¹⁰ See, for instance, Capps, *A Time to Laugh*; Capps, “Religion and Humor”; Claassens, “Laughter and Tears”; Ellis, *Humorists vs. Religion*; Geybels & Van Herck, *Humour and Religion*; Laude, *Divine Play, Sacred Laughter, and Spiritual Understanding*.

ridicule/entertainment, and building community.¹¹ A number of the studies that have explored the performance of comedy, humor, and jokes as social critique construes them as a form of “resistance politics.”¹² That is, the weapon of the weak and the dispossessed against powerful hegemonies (usually defined as the state authority and a conniving elite class).¹³ The thrust of these studies prop up the unsettling nature of laughter and how its impulsive expulsion from the body can undo the official attempt by hegemonic political forces at constructing faux reality as a veneer over the surface of actual social life.¹⁴ For instance, Donna Goldstein’s study of women in the shantytowns of Rio De Janeiro points out jest-making as a coping mechanism, an “absurdist discourse that produces laughter,” particularly in a political context with a “moral and legal system incapable of addressing grievances.”¹⁵ The dissension with hegemonic political power that satire, ridicule, and other forms of laughter-inducing performances represent is one of the few ways the silenced masses and the self-muted subject give a visual and aural sound to their experiences.¹⁶

A clear departure from the school of thought that treats comedy as a weapon includes postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe, who complicates the relationship between the powerful and the dominated in the post colony. Mbembe argues that the conviviality in the relation between the powerful and the dominated zombifies both sides, and

¹¹ Banjo, “What Are You Laughing At?”; Cheruiyot & Uppal, “Pan-Africanism as a Laughing Matter”; Devlieger, “Rome and the Romans”; Halliwell, “The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture.”; Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany, 1933–1945*; Obadare, “The Uses of Ridicule”; Provine, “Laughter as an Approach to Vocal Evolution”; Weitz, *Theatre and Laughter*.

¹² This is a reference to James Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak*, where he shows that the weak are not entirely powerless and manifestations of their agency do not always come through singular and spectacular acts of heroism, or similarly organized revolutions but through everyday actions.

¹³ See, for instance: Helmy & Frerichs, “Stripping the Boss”; Pearce & Hajizada, “No Laughing Matter”; Sorensen, “Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression.”

¹⁴ Examples include: Beard *Laughter in Ancient Rome*; Dubberley, “Humor as Resistance”; MacKenzie, Francis & Giappone. *Comedy and Critical Thought*; Niebyski, *Humoring Resistance*; Sorensen, “Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression.”

¹⁵ Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place*, 271–272.

¹⁶ Hammett, “Resistance, Power and Geopolitics in Zimbabwe”; Kuhlmann, “Zimbabwean Diaspora Politics and the Power of Laughter.”

does not necessarily lead to social ruptures.¹⁷ Similar arguments resonate through critiques of humor and ridicule in works by Nwira and Lipenga, Bozzini, and Pype, where they too use various examples to illustrate that humor can be reifying of the power structures it purportedly seeks to dislodge.¹⁸ In critically teasing out the “resistance” narrative from various comedy performances, analyses have focused on how comedy performances affectively connect with marginal subjects in staging acts of daily refusals to cooperate with hegemonic power, thereby generating a momentum that can lead to larger social transformation. This approach to finding social correctives in comedy weaves “unspoken linkages between ethics, power, and agency,” limits its assessment of successful comedy to its revolutionary ethos, and ultimately overlooks the fact that even resistance politics can be conservative.¹⁹

A middle position is to treat the art of making and performing comedy as, according to Obadare, ambivalent.²⁰ By *ambivalence*, he considers humor as a “neutral weapon which can be used by and against both the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak.’”²¹ In the same vein, I also consider humor as a neutralized weapon open for uses toward causes that enhance the power identity of both the already strengthened and the ones looking to transcend their status. Rather than humor as upsetting political power, my analysis explores the both the possibilities it generates and the limits of its performance. Humor is so versatile that in one context it might generate laughter that heals and bonds, but also creates more pain especially for those who are at its receiving end.²² What in one context might be taken as a pushback against power may, in fact, be a self-ridicule where the disenfranchised stage their lack of agency against the unrelenting power of the state.²³ As a performance practice that functions as both a social and a political tool, it has multiple edges that cut through the social fabric, but only

¹⁷ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 111.

¹⁸ Bozzini, “The Catch-22 of Resistance”; Ngwira & Lipenga, “A Country Laughing at Itself”; Pype, “Funerary Comedies in Contemporary Kinshasa.”

¹⁹ Brassett, “British Comedy, Global Resistance.”

²⁰ Obadare, “The Uses of Ridicule.” ²¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

²² Halliwell, “The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture”; Peacock, *Slapstick and Comic Performance*.

²³ Willems, “Comic Strips and ‘the Crisis.’” See also Davies, “Exploring the Thesis of the Self-Deprecating Jewish Sense of Humor”; Herzog, *Dead Funny*; Thurston, “Social Dimensions of Stalinist Rule.”

with the level of force that its wielder can muster. The power of making jest is also tentative because, “things first expressed in jest may later be articulated in serious terms.”²⁴

In the next section, I will elaborate on the nature of gospel comedy and the laughter it causes to explore the notions of anti-authority power in comedy performances. If “jokes are a metaphor for understanding the distribution of power and the nature and dynamics of social relationships within given configurations,”²⁵ how is this expressed in gospel comedy that is performed in Pentecostal church settings where both slave and master moralities, the dominant and the dominated, converge under the same roof to worship?²⁶ What are the inherent attributes of gospel comedy that may or not give it social transformation possibilities? To rephrase that last question in tandem with Aboki4Christ’s idea of what comedy can achieve, does joking about demons really transform our psychological relationship with them? How does joking with the things of God change the structures of relationship with the anointed men of God who produce the signs and symbols that structure faith? In most studies that characterize humor and laughter as resistance against power or as reinforcement of it, analysts at least have clear ideas of what constitutes the apparatus of hegemonic power and its dichotomy, the subaltern. There are no such clear-cut hierarchies in the church structure.

Gospel Comedy: The Motley and the Cassock

According to Olatunde Taiwo, the stand-up comedy industry in Nigeria is largely a culmination of years of labor by different humor merchants from the earliest days of the introduction of television to Nigeria in the late ’50s. Their labor was not often well rewarded until around 1995 when second-generation comedians like Atunyota Alleluya Akpobome (popularly known as Ali Baba) emerged on the scene, professionalized the industry, and turned comedy into an act performed before upper class or elite audiences who could afford to pay decent amounts for their shows. The third-generation comedians, a sizeable number of them Pentecostal Christians and who had grown

²⁴ Bernal, “Please Forget Democracy and Justice,” 308.

²⁵ Obadare, “The Uses of Ridicule.”

²⁶ Wariboko, “African Pentecostal Political Philosophy.”

up in a country deeply suffused with Pentecostal ethos, evolved the evangelical angle of those comedy performances.²⁷ This third generation, most of whom began to perform in their churches from around the early 2000s, were young people who had been raised in a church. They saw how many singers and drama artists began their careers in church, and they grew to see the altar as a stage to both use their gifts for God and launch their careers.

One of the comedians told me his comedy career began when he saw himself in the same place as the biblical Moses whom God asked what he had in his hand. When Moses responded that it was a staff, God helped him weaponize it to free the Israelites from slavery. For him, every talent or any similar intangible possession of the Christian is usable for the church as long as its result will glorify God. Again, considering this set of young comedians were socialized within the Pentecostal culture, they had also imbibed enough of its social practices to generate resource materials for their professions. Akpororo said,

I broke in[to the industry] with one joke which talks about a mad man who went to a church to give a special number. I shared this joke at the ‘Laugh and Jam’ organised by Basketmouth [real name: Bright Okpocha, a fellow comedian]. It was a joke that just came about. In my church we have a programme we call, ‘E-mad men’. We take care of mentally ill people. We don’t discriminate. But when you hear me talk about madmen, it is because I have studied them. When you hear me talk about pastors, it is because I am a church boy.²⁸

Another comedian who also attributed his career trajectory to the opportunities the church afforded him was Oladipupo Daniel of the performing duo, StillRinging. He said his path to gospel comedy started when he realized that church services were becoming too routine and required variety.²⁹ He felt it was his calling to introduce new forms into the church, and comedy was the tool he had to do so.

By now, everyone knows the order of service. If they say service starts at 10:00 a.m., you can be certain that by 10:10 a.m., they are on praise worship. People get bored when there is nothing new to engage them. It was during one of our fellowship programs that I started thinking of what I could do to bring

²⁷ Taiwo, “From Jagua to Ali Baba.”

²⁸ www.tori.ng/news/4103/hunger-pushed-me-to-start-comedy-akpororo.html

²⁹ The names of the StillRinging duo are Oladipupo Daniel and Ogunsina Ayodeji Samuel.

some more life to the service. When I first started this, one of the pastors at [a well-known church] told me, “Your comedy is good but too churchy. Take it to the world. Take it to the poor. Take it everywhere. What you will be doing is planting seed. If you perform in a pub, somebody will remember that there is church tomorrow and come. When they hear Still Ringing is coming to our church, they will want to come because they want to see you.” He laid hands on me and blessed me.³⁰

Oladipupo Daniel was not the only one encouraged by his pastor to take his church gift to the world. For several comedians who began in church, their pastors played the role of producers and talent hunters. For instance, according to Akpororo (real name: Jephtha Bowoto), even his iconic stage name came in a moment of inspiration that had to do with his pastor who already knew he had the talent for making jokes. Akpororo said, “One day I was raining abuses on a guy in church and I said to him: *You wey your head look like Akpororo . . .* My bishop then looked at me and said, ‘why don’t you change your name from Holy Son to Akpororo?’ That’s how the name became mine from that day onward.”³¹ For Holy Mallam too, his pastor had a role to play in helping him discover his talent. He said,

I was an undergraduate at Lagos State University. The Foursquare Campus Fellowship, then led by Pastor Seyi Jaiyeola organized an event at the LASU car park. One of my Church members knew the pastor, so she introduced me to him. He auditioned me for about five minutes before he gave me the opportunity. I spent about seventeen minutes on stage. It was explosive. From then on, I began to get a lot of invitations to different churches, fellowships and events. There was a particular night vigil where I worked as the Master of Ceremonies and got paid N500.³²

Another gospel comedian, Olusesi Adebisin, also referenced the role the church and the pastor played in the making of his career. He is a member of the Winners’ Chapel, one of the largest churches in Nigeria, and acting with the church drama unit helped him to hone his skills. He said,

Stand-up comedy began like a joke for me. I used to be in a drama unit in my church . . . and each time I acted no matter the role given, it was always funny

³⁰ Personal interview.

³¹ www.tori.ng/news/4103/hunger-pushed-me-to-start-comedy-akpororo.html

³² www.vanguardngr.com/2013/08/i-hawked-bread-pure-water-to-pay-my-school-fees-holy-mallam/

because I used the Hausa accent. One day, I attended a programme at our church headquarters in Ota, there I saw a comedian named 'Holy Mallam' performing and he was doing clean family-friendly jokes with a Hausa accent. So I said to myself I can do what this guy is doing. And when I got back to my local assembly anytime we had youth programmes or other special programmes in the church I asked the pastor to spare me five minutes to do jokes and he obliged me once after which he kept giving me more opportunities. That was around 2002 and 2003.³³

Rather than discouraging the comedians from following a career trajectory that could lead them down the slopy path of worldliness, their pastors actively encouraged them to engage church members with their comedy and broaden their spheres before a non-church audience too. By mentoring these artists, helping them see their potential as performers and giving them space within the church to perform, these pastors midwived a generation whose talents could have been lost or misused because of lack of opportunities. When they became well-known performers, many remained beholden to their faith, pastors, and church background.

Comedians and their performances of humor in the church bring a combination of pop culture star power and secular entertainment. The roles of the stand-up comedian and the Pentecostal preacher are already similar in the use of technique, affects, stagecraft, and their overall goals. As Iain Ellis said, "both concentrate power, control, and purpose on a stage within a singular being whose task is to convince and win over audiences . . . both are teachers whose 'sermons' must be carefully constructed and paced in order to move spirits."³⁴ The gospel comedian, like the preacher, strives to give the audience a pleasurable experience through laughter. While a pastor's use of humor is complementary to the sermon, the gospel comedian's goal is primarily to make the church laugh. Their brand of comedy ridicules virtually every and anything. Just like they do in their non-church performances, these comedians make fun of poverty, witches, police, ethnic stereotypes, mental health, disabled, sex-based relationships (without being explicit), and political elites. They prance about on stage in church while they freely make jokes about violent and anti-social behavior. The only people typically spared from ridicule are the pastor and his wife.

³³ www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2016/10/01/i-started-stand-up-comedy-in-the-church/

³⁴ Ellis, *Humorists vs. Religion*, 61.

StillRinging’s brand of comedy mimics regular church services, and it is this detail – the similitude of church worship, prayer, and parodied reenactment of actual church situations creatively interjected with comedy – that makes the group distinct. Their act mimics the lively relationship that sometimes exists between preachers and their “interpreters” (that is, those who stand beside the preacher on the altar and translate his words into indigenous languages for those in the audience who either do not understand English or prefer to hear the sermon in local languages). Here is how it works: one performer mimics the church leader’s stagecraft while the other interprets. They use simple sentences already familiar to the audience because they are randomly lifted from actual church sermons. While one of the comedians “preaches,” the other performer translates it into Yoruba language but deliberately misinterprets the meaning of the “sermon.” Rather than a direct translation, the “interpreter” inserts witty comments derived from gossip from popular and social culture into his translation, thus changing the meaning entirely. The main preacher – played by Daniel – would feign shock and annoyance at the interpreter, who sometimes pretending to be unaware and sometimes acting unfazed, will continue to mangle the sermon to the delight of the audience who would roar with laughter. For instance, in one skit by StillRinging that took place during a church vigil tagged “Audacity of Praise,” this exchange occurred:

PREACHER: (Points to someone in the audience) You cannot be selfish and be transformed!

INTERPRETER: (In Yoruba) You don’t want to take a selfie near (an electric) transformer.

PREACHER: Because when light comes upon you . . . You will be shocked by the glory

INTERPRETER: (In Yoruba) When electric light shocks you, you will dance “shoki” into glory.

(Audience roars with laughter)

PREACHER: I will pray for you quickly . . . I know you are all children that will obey

INTERPRETER: I know you are not “wobe” children.³⁵

³⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCaVCC0hWnw

Sometimes, as the punchline is delivered and the audience burst into another round of laughter, the comedians let the laughter subside by filling the gap with the “preacher” acting frustrated with his mischievous interpreter. Here is another instance of their exchange,

PREACHER: You know you are a father of many nations . . .

INTERPRETER: (feigning shock and responding in Yoruba) Ah-ha!
When one is not Tuface!³⁶

(Both preacher and interpreter break character and burst into laughter along with the congregation).³⁷

The Tuface that the “preacher” referred to here, meanwhile, is one of the most popular artists in Nigeria and Africa, and he has been fodder for many comedy routines because of his rather cavalier personal life that saw him having multiple children with women to whom he was not married. This public aspect of his private life provoked laughter from the knowing audience, clearly showing that contemporary Pentecostals are not sequestered from pop culture. Their familiarity with lingo from popular music like “wobe” and urban dance like “shoki” shows they are active participants in this secular sphere, along with its undercurrents of gossip and ridicule.

The joke itself in this kind of performance lies in the transposition of the message of the gospel – presented by mimicking the voice or the mannerisms of a pastor when making his spiritual declaration in church – with banal comments from popular culture and its attendant gossip. The efficacy of the joke lies in the way familiar signs from the Bible connect with signs from popular culture and street vernaculars, along with the delivery tactic of linking an open end of one system of signs with another. This near-seamless conjoining of prayers and various biblical references with popular culture references is striking because the transmutation of one to another, effectively, was an unexpected sleight of hand. By decontextualizing the Bible and its prophetic blessings of making the listener the father of many nations (the promise God made to Abraham in the book of Genesis), they also created an interpretive framework to understand the Scripture in both sacred and profane forms. “To obey” became “wobe,” a slang for “street urchins”

³⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAioInibFfw

³⁷ Older generation Nigerian comedians have used this technique of language mistranslation to satirize the colonial era where the words of the “master” are mistranslated into the language of the “native.”

and to be delightfully shocked by God’s transformative power such that it feels like an electric current was commuted to shoki, a freestyling popular dance. The joke works, first because of the flexibility of the language and the creativity of the users. It also resonated with the audience because of their double consciousness as both Pentecostal and social subjects; their twinned subjectivities that place them in the social spots where they can understand two languages: Yoruba and English; religious and secular; spiritual and frivolous. The congregation is able to migrate along the spectrum of church and the world to see the shift in meanings from the things of God – delivered with dense seriousness by the supposed man of God – to secular registers.

Those use of quips by the “interpreter” to the prayers by the “preacher” is also a subterfuge. It cheerfully points out to the church member the irony of the prayer that they intone an “amen” to, without necessarily disarming the larger spiritual import of that prayer in their minds. Suddenly, the prayer about being “the father of nations” was no longer about the expansiveness of promised divine blessings, but the irresponsibility of an unbridled libido. These jokes, meanwhile, are sometimes performed in the church space and on the church altar too. There are times when the comedy performances occur within a church during special programs, at another venue outside the church, or at special church programs too. Either way, there is an altar or a stage where the preacher stands and which becomes a consecrated space. That same sacred place is where the comedian – and in this case, the StillRinging group – also stand to mimic the meaning-making utterances the man of God puts before the audience. The congregation that watches, from the same altar, an emanation of both their pastors’ prophecies and comedians’ parody of the process, finds themselves also playing the role of an interpreter. As they laugh, they also sieve through the existing range of ideas and meanings to fuse a coherent narrative from the performance they are watching. Sometimes, the comedy act precedes the sermon and is slotted into the same interregnum where gospel music (by artists mostly invited to the church for that occasion) is also performed. Sometimes, the gospel comedy is inserted in the intermission between one session of the sermon and another, when people must have been yearning for decompression after listening to the pastor for an hour or more. As the congregation participates in this exchange through their laughter, they are simultaneously seekers of spiritual experience and seekers of pleasurable experience, both

occurring within a single church program. Sometimes, as the previous example shows, the “interpreter” perhaps challenges the “man of God” to consider the irony in some of his prayers and prophecies.

Although these comedians mostly insisted their brand of humor is divinely inspired, they are not shy to admit how much they keep up with current events of popular culture for material for their performances. This means that the audience that comedy performances cultivate is open to various cultural influences that make the material familiar and relatable. Meanwhile, as comedians extend the same jokes and brand of delivery to secular engagements, they are mindful that their act does not “churchify” those spaces and make people uncomfortable while listening. Daniel said, “Some people (the program organizers, that is) don’t even want you to mention Jesus, Jehovah, or the devil in your performance. Those words can make people uncomfortable and so they replace a word like ‘Satan’ with ‘the enemy.’ We leave that for strictly church settings.”³⁸

With gospel comedians’ professionalization of their act arose the need to define themselves even when they cross over into the non-church arena as performers. Some artists make only what they call “clean jokes,” or contents deemed fit for church. As Holy Mallam says of his art, “I noticed that there was nothing like Christian comedy, and I decided to start that . . . I started ethical comedy in Nigeria and I chose to be clean.”³⁹ As a form of self-definition, “clean” meant that he marketed himself as a Christian who performed a non-vulgar kind of comedy that he labeled “ethical comedy.” Holy Mallam, whose comedy routines in churches consist of exhortations and prayers, is a member of one of Nigeria’s biggest churches, Living Faith Church, (aka the Winners’ Chapel). His performances are usually prefaced with expressions such as “Praise the Lord” and “thank you Jesus.” He does not stop at just making jokes, he also preaches, prays, prophesies, and peppers his act with an occasional “Amen?” His jokes mostly consist of tales about his Christian social life and lots of self-denigrating ridicule about living his formative years in acute poverty. In one of his acts at the *He Lives Bible Church* at Bletchley in England, he told his church audience, “When people see me, they expect that it’s the usual comedy

³⁸ Personal interview.

³⁹ www.vanguardngr.com/2013/08/i-hawked-bread-pure-water-to-pay-my-school-fees-holy-mallam/

that they hear everywhere that I do, but I was not called to do that. I was called into an assignment. There is gospel comedy, amen? Say to your neighbor, ‘gospel comedy.’”⁴⁰ On his social media pages, he markets himself as an “ethical gospel comedian . . . with family friendly jokes.” He says of his kind of art,

Ethical comedy is the only way out as far as I am concerned. It’s about the only kind of comedy that makes sense . . . One of the things I learnt which helped build my career is ethics. The ethics of a profession are the principles that guide it. It sets a borderline that we must not cross. It stipulates what is acceptable in a profession. I understood this before I started comedy. And it has helped me. Ethical comedy is an acceptable and non-vulgar comedy. Ethical comedy does not only cut across all spectra; it’s also relevant everywhere, unlike the others . . . Insulting people, ‘yabbing’ them and doing vulgar jokes are, to me, totally unacceptable. Nevertheless, you may find some people who appreciate them. I have a right to do what works for me. This is what works for me.⁴¹

He is not alone in this self-positioning. Several others who grew up in the church, such as Aboki4Christ and StillRinging, likewise take themselves seriously as mediators of the sacred experience. They moderate their jokes even in non-church settings, and they say they take good care to not overstep bounds so as not to corrupt their brand. They are fiercely insistent that what they do is the work of God, and, as ministers, they do not want to be seen as flippant. Others who make the usual stand-up comedy and perform in church get called out when they cross the line of acceptable public conduct for people who perform in church. An example is Akpororo who removed his shirt and displayed his bare torso while performing at a church event.⁴² That was not the only time he was criticized for his excesses. At the 2018 *TheExperience* show – an annual gospel music festival (and perhaps Nigeria’s biggest music show), featuring local and international Christian artists and typically attended by thousands of people all over the country – Akpororo’s comic routine generated some controversy.⁴³ After he had spent some time saying he wished he had “annoying anointing” to punish the people who irritated him, ranted

⁴⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCoux0Oz3dQ

⁴¹ www.gistmania.com/talk/topic,206840.0.html

⁴² <https://punchng.com/why-i-slammed-akpororo-for-performing-shirtless-sammie-okposo/>

⁴³ <http://theexperielagos.com/2018/>

talked about tithes payment, and excoriated Daddy Freeze (see Chapter 4) over his campaign against tithes, Akpororo moved to valorizing the spiritual power and the righteousness of the senior pastor of House on the Rock and the convener of the *TheExperience*, Pastor Paul Adefarasin. He joked about the pastor's wife, Ifeanyi, who was sitting beside her husband at the program. Akpororo said the pastor had an overdose of anointing because of his wife's captivating beauty. He said her beauty was so spiritually intoxicating that the couple communicates in their house by speaking in tongues only. Her husband's spiritual power as a pastor, he says, is boosted by his wife's looks. Akpororo proceeded to speak in tongues himself to demonstrate this point.⁴⁴ His speaking in tongues as a joke, beamed on live TV and streamed on multiple social media networks, was not well-received by some Christians who thought he went too far and subsequently criticized the church for permitting such excesses. Some even criticized him for saying he correlated a sacred gift like anointing with dealing with annoyance. However, at that festival, he was on a roll. In the second joke he made which also triggered mixed responses – roars of laughter followed by howls and boos of surprise at the sheer audacity – Akpororo said that in Warri, Delta State, the city in the southern region of Nigeria where he comes from, “people” would walk out of the church if the pastor's wife was not as beautiful as Pastor Ifeanyi Adefarasin. Mimicking the voice of those “people” he posed a question (in pidging but which I have translated to English), “If the pastor does not have the eyes to see and marry a beautiful woman, how can he have eyes to see our future?”⁴⁵

I should note that that was not the only time Akpororo would make a joke about the looks of a pastor's wife or even the pastor himself. This eroticization and sexual fantasy directed at the pastor's wife from the church stage is recurrent in his act. For instance, in 2015, during the sixteenth-anniversary celebration of COZA, he also made a similar joke. Akpororo's niche is his “Warri boy” image which gives his performance its traction, and which helps him escape accountability for certain transgressions. Warri is an oil-rich city and its notoriety has been iconized in popular culture with the trope of “Warri boy” or “Warri pikin,” a stereotypical image of someone who is irreverent of all authority, uncouth, noisy, rough, and somewhat quick to instigate violence. When Akpororo gets on stage, he enacts that characteristic

⁴⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFpXSt7hiHo ⁴⁵ Ibid.

unruliness with his whole body. His gestures are animated, and his voice booming out of the microphone turned up to the highest decibel as he prances around on the stage. On this occasion at COZA where he was performing on the altar, he said to the congregation (in pidgin English but which I have once again translated to English), “I tell people, when a man of God is so handsome and also has anointing, how can a demon go near him? It is even from a distance that such pastor casts out demons.”

At this point, Akpororo whistles at an imaginary demon from a distance and shoos it off with his hand. The video cuts to the pastor and his wife laughing heartily and some members of the congregation jumping on their feet while laughing and clapping excitedly. Akpororo then descends one step down from the steps on the altar while looking in the direction of the pastor’s wife sitting on the front row opposite him. “Mama, you are fresh! You are like today’s bread.” He shouts “heyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!” and the video cuts to that of the pastor’s wife laughing at the joke along with her husband. Those sitting around them join in laughing and screaming and clapping while also casting glances at the couple to watch their reaction to the jokes. Now thoroughly stimulated, Akpororo walks up and down the altar. Behind him on the altar wall was a life-size virtual projection of his image with exaggerated facial expressions. He puts the microphone back to his mouth and mimics a preacher’s technique of ensuring participation by asking the congregation to turn to their neighbor and shout “hey!” Then he continued,

But seriously, if church can look like this on earth, how would heaven be? Look at your neighbor and say, “I want to see you there!” Don’t miss the road! Let us meet there! Ah-ha! Look at the groove! *Chai!* Look, if you don’t know Jesus, you are missing! No joke. Unbelievers go to club, but as Christians, this (the church) is our club.⁴⁶

In drawing attention to the physical appearance of the pastor and his wife – and even fantasizing about the wife’s body by comparing her to the allure of freshly produced food – one sees a Christian eroticism which O’Neill says “re-politicizes believers to take to their soul rather than the streets” (to protest, that is).⁴⁷ Though the joke makes both the

⁴⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_AXLJZCjXI

⁴⁷ O’Neill, “I Want More of You: The Politics of Christian Eroticism in Postwar Guatemala.”

pastor and his wife objects of sexual fantasy, their non-availability for consumption by the laughing congregation (who are looking in the couple's direction even as they laugh) strengthens their power in the imagination. They are desirable, but their not being available to the audience who watches them from a distance reifies the idea of the power they embody. The audience laugh at Akpororo's antics on the altar. Several times, the video cut to scenes of the congregation laughing with gusto.

The focus on the audience reaction to the performance brings me back to the theorization of comedy as "resistant politics." The laughter instigated by gospel comedy does not appear as subversive, but is in fact, a re-inscription of class power and domination. For the churches that preach prosperity gospel especially, the whole enterprise of comedy on the altar is to facilitate an excitable environment that galvanizes belief. The reifying of pastors' spiritual authority and the intense laughter by the congregation, are more a conservative politics of power than a challenge of it. In a context where Akpororo's comedy conflates pastors' physical beauty with social class and spirituality, and those that laugh included not just the congregation but the pastor, his wife (and on some occasions, the crew of politicians that sits by the pastor in the front rows watching the comedian on the altar), which laughter can be said represents subalternity and which is that of power?

Interestingly, in one of his jokes at *TheExperience*, Akpororo commented on someone's testimony of overcoming poverty. He said when the person narrated their experience before the crowd, "the rich people sitting in front said 'awwww' while the poor people sitting at the back wondered thought, 'So? Is that one even a story of poverty?'" He then proceeded to challenge that person's account with a worse narration of what the poor go through by ventriloquizing their voices and the resolute acceptance of their lot. At that moment, the comedian first acknowledged the unevenness of the power dynamic of class differences in the gathering but spoke to the stratification by ridiculing poverty rather than critique the conditions that nurture it. By painting graphic cases of poverty to show the many ways things could be worse, he helped the testifier enhance the miracle of what had been overcome through the power of God and a consequence of the anointing of their pastor whose spiritual calling had helped the person break the strangleholds of poverty. To remind the congregation how poor people were outside the bounds of that church event was not a conscientization of

the rich people and the political leaders sitting there, it was playing the stories for laughs and making it seem the poor enjoy their poverty. Gospel comedians recognize that the space they are granted on the church altar is a privilege, and they consciously orient their performance toward the church's corporate priorities. Their much-touted artistic freedom as jokers, and which is often valorized in theoretical analysis, is willfully constricted at that moment. Joke-telling, the so-called weapon of the weak, in the hands of a comedian committed to the service of reifying the power identity of the pastor, is ambivalent.

Gospel Comedy and the Unlikely Space of Resistance Politics

If there is any subversive politics to the practice of bringing comedians to church to perform, it is not so much in the contents of the jokes to produce "social inversion, 'the-world-turned-upside-down' scenario where slave governs master or man bites dog; the ridiculing of foolishness, narrow-mindedness, and the rigid insistence on the inflexible systems of living; and comic transfigurations that permit the investigation of alternative identities or suspensions of law governing the bodies."⁴⁸ Rather, it is in the sheer incongruity of having comedians perform in the church at all. Allowing comedians space to make jokes about the things of God, demonic forces, deliverance, speaking in tongues, heaven, beauty, social differences, and supernatural power is a level of transgression that celebrates the dominance and the self-assuredness of the Pentecostal movement. As mentioned in previous chapters, the gospel of prosperity facilitated some of these changes in church activities. Having shifted the congregational focus from the afterlife to an idea of "heaven on earth," the church services likewise had to reflect the enjoyment of what the world had to offer. And the congregation members too have become amenable to gospel comedy, happily laughing over gossip from popular culture as they would do in a secular assembly. By listening to various stories, including ones that praised their pastor's spiritual power, wealth, family, and also watch his wife's physical looks glorified, they are reassured of their choice to identify with an assembly of people who embody collective fantasies of a good life.

⁴⁸ Stott, *Comedy*, 2.

The performances of gospel comedies, orbiting around Christian life and social expectations, spiritual warfare, and social attitudes toward Christians do not fulfill the conditions of hegemonic subversion through jest. Comedians themselves do not publicly criticize spiritual authority in their performances. They may occasionally criticize the Christian social life and its doctrines, but they skirt around the man of God and his foibles. They are mindful of the cultural power that pastors wield and do not want to risk offending them or their devoted church members. If the “oldest, most basic role of the comedian is . . . role of *negative exemplar*,”⁴⁹ that is, a social or moral deviant who can take on the part of a spokesperson for cultural sensibilities (because they are first a spittoon for collective scorn), then gospel comedians find themselves in a spot where they have to balance that supposed social marginality and the creative license that it grants them with other spiritual sensibilities. They must foreground their performances by saluting the pastor and reifying his spiritual authority before performing. On some occasions, some comedians start their performance on the altar by prostrating before the pastor fully – and of course, God – thus underscoring the power dynamics that condition the production of the jokes and how their delivery would proceed before the audience. This statement of deference to his authority is practical and also reflective of the reality of control of the market by powerful pastors in a society already saturated by religion. The comedian’s success capitulates to the gravitational pull of business constraints and can hardly dare the inordinate radicalism of comedy. So, no matter how radical their performances may be outside church circuits, they do not risk touching the anointed of God because of the possible fallout. Their job is to enhance his power identity before the congregation who also need a continuous guarantee of their pastor’s social and spiritual power.

It is also understandable why the content of gospel comedy hardly defies the authority of the church and political establishment that solicits church leaders within the church space. The church is the place where both the working class and the elites meet, and that is also the place where their tenuous differences – and the circumstances that shaped them – are momentarily dissolved in the spirit of worship. For the dominated who come to church – particularly a church that preaches the prosperity gospel – seeking to escape their difficult social condition, a radical agenda that disrupts the power of the clergy is not the first thing

⁴⁹ Mintz, “Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation.”

in their minds but an aspirational desire for the power wielded by the dominant class. Therefore, the suspension of dominant norms, the affront to moral orthodoxies, and the inversion of attitudes by comedic acts is not found in the content of the jokes or the mode of delivery of gospel comedy, the aspects with which most analyses of comedy obsess.

Church members too wield social and economic power that could determine the comedian's career trajectory, so comedians subjugate the radical potential of comedy under the governing power of spiritual hierarchies. Church members who attend services with gospel comedy surveyed for this chapter remain clear about their spiritual expectations of God from their church services and insist they are not carried away by laughter but remember where they were. No matter the social atmospherics, their national and political situations remain real, and personal and spiritual problems have to be solved. That they are amused enough to laugh aloud does not mean they lose themselves to the point where they will tolerate insults to their pastor or his anointing and what it promises to them.

Interestingly, where some dissension occurs is not in the comedy on the stage but the sober space backstage where both comedians and pastors have to negotiate rewards for the artist. Almost all of the gospel comedians interviewed for this work stated that their church performances pay relatively poorly – few pastors treat what they do as a profession and pay these gospel comedians what they see as fair wages. Even when some pastors pay at all, they only offer a pittance and they call it “money for fueling the car.” According to some of these comedians, they sometimes do not get paid because the church's presiding pastor is too conservative to consider joke-telling as a job and therefore did not give an order to his administrators to pay for the comedian's services. One comedian said, “When you finish your ministration, some pastors will just pray for you. One pastor told me once, *I see you go places with this your comedy!* I thanked him for his vision, but I told him, ‘Daddy, if you want me to go places, you must give me the fare. I will not trek to that place.’” This retort indicates an attitude developed to ensure the comedic vocation is taken seriously. While the comedians reinforce pastoral power through the enterprise of comedy, they also privately challenge them by insisting they will not work for free. The same comedian said,

If every church blesses me as payment, if that is the only thing they do for me, how will I pay my house rent? That is why a lot of those that started their

music and comedy career in the church have gone secular. That is where the money is. We cannot shy away from the fact that money is important to grow the ministry. Even the church needs money. If you want the talent and potentials of God's children to manifest, you have to talk about money.

Not all comedians are bold enough to say this to their pastors' faces, however. Some said they cannot publicly protest if they are not paid by the pastors. To do so would be to activate "the spirit of rebellion" and rebellion is not only considered a sin against God, it can promote a disaffection for them among church members whose patronage is integral to their success.

They said they have therefore developed tactics for getting paid, and those schemes are usually carried out in the smaller churches. A comedian narrated that after an endless stream of performances in churches across the country, some of which either did not pay or paid poorly, he had to learn to issue an invoice prior to his showing up on the altar. Sometimes, he said, pastors would promise they would pay and then disappear after church service. So, he started demanding to be settled upfront. One said, "Some pastors are scandalized by my demand for money. They love what I do, but they want me to do it in the name of God, for the love of Jesus Christ. When I talk about money, they say, *how dare you charge God?*" Then I tell them, *I am not charging God. I am charging you!*" By de-anchoring the man of God from God himself, they maintain the clarity necessary to maintain a business stance within a religious ethos predicated on communalism and free gifts of one's talents to God. Another comedian told me that sometimes he would agree to come to the church after the pastor had badgered him or blackmailed him to offer his service to God for free, but he would not show up. After he had done that a few times, he said word got around and they learned to respect that his talents, just like that of the pastors, deserves to be respected. And "respect" is predicated on being paid.

The role money plays in the relationship is significant in understanding the tension between the idea of a church as space where private convictions are legitimized and the church as a corporatized entity. According to Keith Hart, the wage labor system is a mediator of two spheres: the vast endlessness of the market, and the domestic and closed space of the home. The market is the zone of infinite rationality where one's talents are objectively calculated and rewarded with money. The

other sphere, the home, the protected and subjective sphere where intimate personal relations makes the bounds of what is called “work” unknown and infinite. This sense of heightened division and duality between the outside world where our humanity is assailed and the home space where it is reaffirmed forms the moral and capitalist foundation of a society.⁵⁰ But in a church setting where a performer believes they are working for God and even consider themselves indebted to the church that nurtured them, they also want to be treated as professionals and the binaries of market and home fall short as a descriptor of how one could navigate these spheres. For them, the church represents a market because it is where they get their business, but it is also a home because of the relationships they have built over the years and which has helped them to come this far.

The artists interviewed for this chapter thus created a logic that allows them to mediate between contesting realities and make meaningful connections between themselves as spiritual subjects and as businesspersons dealing with thorny situations of negotiating payment for religious services. This rationality is founded on the practicality and clarity that money brings, and it has helped them to untangle their identity as Christians and as comedians. Yet, at the same time, this reasoning allows them to reconcile the two identities coherently. With money, they can bring a sense of rationality to the subjective relationships of the religious sphere. Also, with money, they maintain a focus on the uses of their gifts and at the same time, the conditions of its exchange. They can synthesize their personal relationship with God and the church with the impersonality of market logic. With money introduced, there is a mutual determination of self-ownership and divine submission. The comedians could own their gift and themselves as the conveyor of comedic talents and structure how they offer it to God. By insisting on being paid – by receiving tangible money (which people have gathered in the church space to pray for anyway) – they can stabilize their identities as Christians, performers, and social subjects with visceral needs.

One of the artists told me that he began to insist on money when he found that he was not given enough honorarium to meet his needs, and he was constantly praying for money. He asked,

⁵⁰ Hart, “The Hit Man’s Dilemma.”

Why go to church and beg God to meet your needs all the time when you can just ask your pastor to pay you for your services? They kept saying that we should perform for free so that God will bless us, and then promise us that we can build a platform for bigger things. After I had done that many times, God opened my eyes to see that I already had a platform. I just needed the wisdom to monetize it.

Yet, another comedian reasoned,

They don't regard what we do as a career and that is a problem. Most pastors do not treat us like professionals. They want us to overlook money and focus on God. It is good to serve God but you also have to eat. You see the same pastor that tells you not to ask for money living off his church. They and their children use nice cars, fly private jets, and live lavishly. What gives them the right to profit from the things of God but denies us the same right? We are all called of God, we should all be paid according to our calling.⁵¹

Yet another one said, "Because we make people laugh does not mean that we ourselves laugh all the time. I am actually a very serious person. I am serious enough to know when my interests are being threatened."⁵²

Through such reasoning, comedians use the logic of capitalism to their own ends. They use money as a tangible and objective measure of what they actually give up when they offer their services to God. In some ways, money represents the power to bridge the gap between oneself and one's desire, and the supernatural empowerment to procure that desire has been the core of the prosperity gospel and its theology of give-and-take that pastors themselves preach. With time, church laborers like comedians have watched the church grow from small personable spaces to impersonal corporate organizations and those who demand money from their pastors for their secular services are thus reacting to changes in church structure. They are no longer willing to continuously sacrifice their talents to an institution without tangible rewards even though they have an affinity and investment in its survival.

It is noteworthy that as much as pastors have preached and prayed about money for people, not paying them for their services was often them merely being callous or shameless exploiters of labor. One could also consider that the pastors were redirecting these artists' attention

⁵¹ Personal interview. ⁵² Personal interview.

away from church as an enterprise and urging them to find their means of support elsewhere. As recently early 2020, there was an open debate about whether churches should be paying artists such as instrumentalists. Some argued that it was only fair since it has become a profession, takes a considerable amount of productive time, and is sometimes the artist's only income. Some others countered saying it was only a matter of time before everybody else in the church begin to demand some payment for their services. These arguments demonstrate a change in the attitude toward church as an organization. For many years, churches have over-valored service rendered in the church as a seed sown to God for a better life. Apart from volunteer services within the church such as singing in the choir, ushering, altar decoration, protocol officials, hospitality, traffic control, intercessory team, technical team, and working in the media department, people have also worked at construction sites, performed janitorial services, and even offered high-end professional labor at no cost. All of these acts of giving to God have facilitated an attitude of commitment to the church, and it is therefore understandable that pastors will not want people's commitment to church activities reducible to paid employment. If they make it all about money, the attitude of faith with which they approached those actions will be lost as people unabashedly perform for money. Marking what is supposed to be a spiritual contribution with money also means that people can afford to be detached and treat the church as a business center rather than one based on spiritual and social relationships.

However, gospel comedians see this mode of thinking as opening them up to exploitation. When they introduced money and insisted on payment instead of spiritual blessings that pastors typically offer them, they were trying to stabilize the relationship between themselves, God, and his human mediators. Money helps them to draw universal and personal connections between the sacred and secular spheres. By saying that they would rather be paid in cash than with prayers, they bring a secular clarity to a sacred relationship while at the same time sacralizing money. It is not enough, these comedians seem to be saying, for pastors to preach about divine provisions and ways of making money and not live up to the standards of their own message. Their desire for a national platform and media power continues to drive this third-generation of comedians to use the church as a launchpad for their sustained career in non-religious contexts. Besides, they are passionate about their faith. They want to be part of the growth of the church.

They want to be a part of the global movement of the spirit. And they want to be able to do all of these as Christians and as businesspeople.

Finally, for these comedians, insisting on being paid was not all about money but about enforcing principles even as they demonstrated their love for God and the church. They might have forced some pastors to pay, but it was still not about the money. The payment could be quite meagre relative to what they receive for performances for secular organizations anyway, and by insisting on being paid, some churches have started to treat them more professionally. They say they had to insist on payment to redefine the terms and conditions of religious identity in present times. It is no longer one's creative contributions that affirm one's belonging in the church community or the "kingdom business," but money too. Money is also the affirmation of participation. Pastors have long touted church as "God's business" or "kingdom business," and have raised a generation of young people that constructed their work ethics and the associated rewards on principles of faith, divine inspiration, and individual talents as viable routes toward wealth generation and financial stability. By reintroducing those same principles into their relationships with pastors who want their services, they let a secularizing ethos underwrite social relations in the church. Comedy, with its ability to cloak serious matters under the mask of the clown, is perhaps the savviest method of enforcing those principles.

Gospel Comedy and Power Identity: A Postscript

This chapter has looked at gospel comedy as part of the artful construction of power identity that publicly affirms the performances of power by leaders but also privately contests its coercive force. By bringing comedians to churches, comedy's ability to produce happiness is appropriated but its radical edge tempered by its pander toward leadership authority. Now far more exposed to ridicule due to the opening of the public sphere through modern technology, Pentecostal leaders strive to control joke production. By coopting comedians, especially famous ones, these leaders preempt the jokes produced about them. This tactic of consecrating popular cultural forms has helped the Pentecostal culture groom and expand its cultural space. Katrien Pye once described this space thus: "Pentecostal/charismatic popular culture (PCPC) then is a particular cultural space of creativity, persuasion, experience and world making that is distinguishable from other

kinds of popular culture through its own artistic, creative and genre features.”⁵³ Indeed, for a time the PCPC was a distinct zone of cultural production while it occupied a countercultural space. Presently, it is so interwoven with the social culture and marketplace systems that some conservatives fear their unique identity as Christians is no longer distinguishable. When Jesse Weaver Shipley wrote about the intersections of popular culture and Pentecostalism in Ghana, his observations about the overlap between the pastors’ and the comedians’ stagecraft was narrated against a backdrop where both operated in the same cultural sphere and mostly interpenetrated through a measure of mutual appropriation of content and techniques.⁵⁴ In recent times, both spheres have become far more intensely linked through performance on the same stage and altar.

One pastor justified using comedians in church to entertain people as being merely realistic. “We now live in a world of ‘God accepts me as I am.’ To try to give the people, especially younger ones, the old-time religion is to lose them. You have to give them what helps them to stay.”⁵⁵ Indeed, leaders have to deal with the challenge of maintaining an edge in a hyper-modern and globalized world where competing desires jockey for attention. Contemporary Pentecostalism also competes with other attractions of modernity that offer a very similar vision of social flourishing and community. Particularly from the ‘90s upwards, Pentecostalism’s successes greatly depended on the resourcefulness of its subjects to see the openings in cultural spaces, and they took advantage of it all. Its success now consists opening more cultural spaces to expand its spheres.

This is not to say that everyone accepts this brave new world where people gather in church and laugh. On one side, some Pentecostals are adamant that the admixture of church with secularist entertainment overly dilutes spirituality with the world. They worry that accommodating such forms will lead to the debauchery that will end the idea of the church as it should be known. They argue from the Scriptures that God said, “My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations”⁵⁶ – and there is no room for play and amusement in Jesus’s prescription of church. They insist that if there is a decline in spiritual fervency that

⁵³ Pype, “The Liveliness of Pentecostal/Charismatic Popular Culture in Africa.”

⁵⁴ Shipley, “Comedians, Pastors, and the Miraculous Agency of Charisma in Ghana.”

⁵⁵ Personal interview. ⁵⁶ Matthew 21:13, KJV & NIV.

needed shoring up with gospel comedy, it is due to too much play; of church borders extending to include the secular world. Inviting comedians and other performers into the church is doubling down on the very factors leading to its demise. One pastor claimed, “It is the lack of the presence of God that people now make up with comedians.”⁵⁷ One of my interviewees who was also against the trend surmised, “Why should lost souls come to church when what they will get here is what they are already getting in the world?” Some others say they are worried that laughing at the things of God will cheapen them, and they think Pentecostals ought to take articles of their faith as seriously as Muslims in Nigeria do – frequently threatening to start a religious riot if they consider their faith blasphemed. On the other side are also Pentecostals who accept the trend as a reality of the times and think a church has to do whatever it can to retain the people who might stray into the world for its amusements. Ironically, these two factions can be present within a single church and vehemently contest these grounds with each other.

When comedians themselves are criticized for invading the church space with their humor and lessening spiritual truths, they counter by making a dynamic interpretation of scripture to justify their performance on the altar. StillRingin said, “I tell my critics that we have made the big men of God who hear from God regularly laugh in church and heavens did not fall. God still answers their prayers. If they can laugh, why not everyone else? Why can’t you laugh? Are you holier than them? God too laughs, why not you?” Indeed, it is remarkable how the images of pastors laughing at the jokes made by these gospel comedians circulate as YouTube videos with titles that sensationalize gospel comedy *see how StillRingin comedian made Bishop Oyedepo almost fall off his chair laughing!* Pastors’ laughter to comedy performances is used for self-legitimation by the comedians and weaponized to confront the critics of their profession. Aboki4Christ too retorted on the subject of whether comedy should be performed in churches:

When they say we should not make comedy in church, I asked them what is church? Is the church the building? I ask where we can make comedy, they say maybe at weddings, birthdays, and secular events. I now ask them, who told you that is not in that place? Do we limit God to the four walls of the

⁵⁷ <https://punchng.com/ill-query-any-pastor-who-hosts-comedian-in-church-okoroafor-assemblies-of-god-head/>

building we call church? As far as I am concerned, the building is not the church. You and I make up the church. If I can make you laugh at your wedding where God is also present, why can't I make you laugh in the place where you go to worship? I carry the presence of God everywhere I go, I not only have the presence of God in the building called the church. If I can make people laugh outside the building we call church with God indwelling within me, why can't I make them laugh inside the building that you and I molded and called the church? Why assume the building is the only habitation of the Almighty? God is too big to be enclosed in that place. There is nothing wrong in making people laugh in church. The building is not the church, the people are.⁵⁸

What is interesting here is not just the appeal to the Scriptures to justify his careers as a co-spiritual laborer with pastors, but how he also articulates the understanding that the borders between the spaces called church and the world are collapsed. This is particularly true when viewed against the constant absorption of secular performances in the church and the secular sphere's overfamiliarity with church performances until there is no demarcation between both spaces. Rather than Christians being tempted to dig into the underground economy of secular and sinful pleasures, their restlessness can now be satisfied by bridging church with every space. These comedians are a testimony to what a church has to do to manage its successes. These comedic performances expose an alternative reality, a counter-world where spirituality and frivolity can exist side by side – where people are comfortable playing with the devil.

If, as scholars have argued, laughter facilitates a sense of community and the shared values that project a common sensibility, then gospel comedy acts as a tool to expand the borders of church and intensify the ideas of ritual practice.⁵⁹ Comedy can corrode our concept of church as a space for solemn spiritual praxis, and pluralize ideas of what faith practices can accommodate and the ways we see and relate to the concept of church. Since the Bible says every place and every space that two or more Christians find themselves is filled with the presence of Jesus,⁶⁰ the idea of people making the church space by the mere fact of their presence ontologizes any gathering and any activity of Christians, and institutes them into “church.” This perception of what is

⁵⁸ Personal interview. ⁵⁹ Merrill, “Feminist Humor.”

⁶⁰ Matthew 18:20, KJV & NIV.

designated church might as well be extended to every space and the fourth wall – or the four walls that make up the church structures – broken and kept open to maintain a post-structural flow that irrigates spiritual energy and social behaviors with radical openness. After this level of expansiveness, what remains of the church is its roof, which, in the spiritual and theological sense, is the omnipresence of God that dominates everywhere.