

# Identity and Ideological Positioning in Popular Nigerian Ethnic Jokes

**'Rotimi Taiwo**

*Department of English  
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria  
[ferotai@yahoo.com](mailto:ferotai@yahoo.com)*

&

**David Donte**

*Department of Languages  
Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria  
[click2davour@gmail.com](mailto:click2davour@gmail.com)*

## **Abstract**

*Ethnic jokes are deeply rooted in the social structure of the contexts in which they are constructed being anchored on socially shared knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and ideologies of the people. This study investigates the discursive constructions of selected ethnic jokes to determine their expression of attitudinal and ideological dispositions of the ethnic groups within the multilingual/multicultural context of Nigeria. Findings reveal the cognitive states of the ethnic groups manifest in the construction of Others and the struggle for social power in the entertainment world. Therefore, inclusion or exclusion strategies are employed to signal consciousness of group identity and solidarity. In addition, ethnic jokes in the country construct stereotypes about linguo-cultural signs, that is, stereotypes that express attitudes about natural linguistic performance, perception of appropriate speech, typical topics and what language represents for people in inter- and intra- ethnic contexts. The study concludes that ethnic jokes in multi-ethnic Nigeria have been stripped of their stigmatising effect owing to the ability of Nigerians to laugh collectively at their perceived prejudices and stereotypes about their socio-cultural and linguistic behaviours.*

**Keywords:** *ethnic, humour, jokes, Otherness, power, stereotypes, ideology*

### **Introduction**

Creating humour through jokes is part of everyday life experiences of humans all over the world and jokes are known to serve many functions for individuals and the society. They are part of the creative practices (Thurlow, 2012: 170) used by humans to maintain an atmosphere of intimacy and perpetual social contact (Thurlow & Brown, 2003). The humour produced in jokes can become an important basis for social cohesion. The moment a joke elicits laughter from people, it affirms the fact that people think the same way about issues and can share their common attitudes, values and prejudices through the indulgence of their capacities.

Humans derive a concrete feeling of enjoyment from jokes which is most commonly manifested in displays of pleasure, including smiles and laughter (Beeman, 2000). Humour is central to our conception of the world, especially, our conception of other people different from us in terms of their ethnicity, race, religion political affiliation and so forth. Therefore, there is tendency for an individual or a group to proclaim some eminency in self by comparison with the infirmity of the other, thereby laughing at them. The superiority theory of laughter posits that certain jokes make us to laugh because they make us feel superior to other people who appear stupid because they have misunderstood an obvious situation, made a stupid mistake, been the hapless victim of unfortunate circumstance or have been made to look stupid by someone else. This, according to Boskin & Dorison (1885), has its roots in social rivalry. Jokes that target and ridicule race or an ethnic group are becoming more popular in nations all over the world. Such jokes exploit ethnic stereotypes associated with people who belong to the target ethnic group. In Nigeria, such jokes are spreading more with the boom in comedy industry in the country. For scholars, like Obadare (2010), the emergence of the humour in Nigeria is not unconnected with the context of recent socio-political liberalisation in the country. Humour in the context of the country is paradoxically bound up with social suffering (Obadare, 2010: 96). It is therefore a major survival kit that helps the people to survive the physical and psychological pains inflicted on them daily through inept governance. Humour has become a big part of the Nigerian entertainment industry with the springing up of stand-up comedians in recent times.

Popular jokes in Nigeria spread typically through jokes sharing in casual conversations; stand-up comedy in live shows; social media platforms, such as Facebook and Whatsapp; comedy plays on the television and radio, and so forth. While it is generally taken that jokes typically elicit laughter and amusement, it is important to note that jokes are not always made merely to produce humour that culminate in laughter and amusement, they sometimes construct evaluative experiences of the producers. And even when the laughter element seems predominant, they are not necessarily devoid of the ideological leaning of the producer. This paper probes the discursive sources of the social practice of ethnic jokes by investigating the implicit and explicit attitudes and ideologies in selected Nigerian ethnic jokes. It also examines the language-related stereotypes expressed in the jokes and how they impact on social interactions of the ethnic groups in the country.

### **Humour and Ethnic Jokes in Nigeria**

Just like in most human societies, making jokes is as old as the existence of communities in Nigeria. Prior to modern times, jokes that produce humour could be seen in oral literary forms, such as folklores, village jesters who add colour to social occasions and friendly banter in casual conversation. Comedy is also a vital part of theatre practice in the country, as there are some popular professional theatre comedians. As observed by Onwuka (2012), each ethnic group in Nigeria has stereotypical conception of the other and such stereotypes have been accentuated through jokes. Taiwo (2013) also notes that humour inhabits a variety of social spaces in the country, such as friendly casual conversations, social events (made by masters of ceremonies), live stand-up comedy shows, comedy plays on the television and radio, comic relief in Nollywood films, newspaper cartoons, comedy skits on social media platforms, and so forth. Ethnic humour was given prominence by popular Nigerian stand-up comedians.

The emergence of the comedy industry in post-colonial Nigeria could be divided into three phases. The first phase was that of the theatre comedy, when comedy was a feature of theatre performance in the immediate post-independence era. Over the years, from the 1970s, theatre comedy on radio and television became

popular in the country with comedians like Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala), Chika Okpala (Zebudaya), and many others. In contemporary times, more theatre comedians have emerged – Nkem Owoh (Osuofia), John Okafor (Mr. Ibu), Babatunde Omidina (Baba Suwe), and Late Rabilu Musa (Ibro). Nigeria is a creation of the colonial power - a nation of about 250 ethnic groups (Nigerian Fact Sheet) with diverse cultures. Blench & Dendo (2003) puts the number of ethnic groups in Nigeria at over 500. Although the different ethnic groups that make up the country have always expressed stereotypes about one another in jokes, such jokes grew considerably due to ethnic, political and religious intolerance that characterise the post-colonial era. The immediate post-independence era witnessed series of political violence and a civil war, which culminated in military interference in political power. This intense ethnic polarization and conflicts continued even till present day. However, over the years with democratisation, humour has become a major means of dealing with the harsh socio-political realities in the country.

The second phase which started in the 1990s is that of the popularisation of stand-up comedy. Adetunji (2013: 3) traced the history of stand-up comedy in Nigeria to 1993, when Allelujah Atupota Akpobome (a.k.a. Ali Baba) performed, regularly, at a Lagos nightclub. Other stand-up comedians later came up. Some of these comedians are popularly known by their stage names, such as Basketmouth, Okey, Bakassi, Bovi, Teju Babyface, Holy Malam, Lepacious Bose, I go dye, and AY. These comedians have featured at different performances across the country and outside. Such shows include: “A Night of a Thousand Laughs”, “Crack ya ribs”, and “Holy Laughter”. Stand-up comedy has become a big industry in Nigeria, as young comedians keep emerging on the scene.

The third phase which came with the liberalisation of the media industry in the late 1990s. With the popularity of the social media in Nigeria, a new breed of comic actors has emerged on Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and so forth. These comedians have devised ways of creating and publishing short animations and hilarious videos on these platforms that leave social media content consumers reeling with laughter. Sharing comedy skits on these instant media has become a national pastime. Many comedy careers have taken off on these platforms. Since comedy skits can be

absorbed and deconstructed by thousands of people in matter of minutes, such comedians soon become favourites of the young people in the country. Their jokes come in different modes, such as narrative texts, pictures, cartoons, caricatures, audios, videos, and so forth.

This spread of humour online is not peculiar to Nigeria; the global shift of humour from face-to-face contexts to the cyberspace has allowed people to consume humour materials on the go. Moreover, since most of the social media apps can be cross-referenced in such a way that *YouTube* can be linked to *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Twitter*, for instance, the consumption of humour materials becomes easier. Some popular Nigerian comic characters that have emerged on the social media are Emanuella and Mark Angel, Kunle Idowu (Frank Donga), Omojuwa, Craze Clown and Wofaifada. While many of their comedy skits just create humour, others, like that of Frank Donga's portray the struggles of the youth in Nigeria, particularly experiences of fresh graduates with job interviews and Nigerians with visa interviews.

Ethnic jokes in the country thrive on the perceived traits of a group and/or its members, which may or may not be erroneous. The commonly used techniques in the jokes are overgeneralization, exaggeration, gestures, accents, and stereotypes. Age long ethnic stereotypes are particularly prominent in Nigerian humour, for instance, the three major ethnic group have been stereotyped in different ways. The Hausa have been stereotyped in Nigerian jokes as uneducated people who could barely string words together to form complete sentences, security guard, *suya* sellers or crooked *Alhajis*. The Igbo people are stereotyped as materialistic and greedy, lovers of money, industrious, calculative and exploitative in business. The Yoruba are stereotyped as lovers of pleasure who "spray" money (placing money on dancers) at *owambe* (lavish) parties. Other minority ethnic groups also have stereotypes associated with them. For instance, the Efik/Ibibio are portrayed as hypersexual and promiscuous, good cooks and seen through the prisms of servitude, portrayed as house maids who have the tendency of seducing their male bosses.

Filani & Ajayi (2019) demonstrates how ideologies are constructed in Nigerian stand-up comedies. They identify three major

sources of ideological projections in such jokes – politics, ethnicity and gender. While the present study shares similar data context with that of Filani and Ajayi, that is Nigerian jokes, the scope is limited to ethnic jokes, which are targeted at perceived traits of an ethnic group or its members by virtue of their specific sociocultural identity (Apte, 1987). Such jokes are being popularised through social media in Nigeria.

### **Perspectives on Ethnic Jokes**

Research on humour has largely been multidisciplinary in nature. However, sociological and psychological approaches have dominated. Sociologists focus on the social and cultural context of jokes and its influence on interpersonal relationships (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002). Psychologists probe into why a joke causes laughter. Sigmund Freud long ago proposed what is now popularly referred to as the Relief Theory, which explains how laughter can relieve tension. According to the theory, making humorous jokes and laughing are major ways to release or save energy generated by repression.

Ethnic jokes are made to accentuate social difference between one ethnic group and another. According to Boskin & Dorison (1985: 81), in the United States ethnic humour originated as a function of social class feelings of superiority. On the other hand, oppressed people have used humour as a survival tool. Vereen, et al. (2006) observe that people consistently see the value of humour in shaping their perspective in times of difficulty and in helping them to adjust to stressful situations. This is what Obadare (2010) see Nigerians doing in the face of pain; rather than lament their challenges, in negative feelings, they release their tension through humour and laughter.

Ethnic jokes police social and geographical boundaries of a group, which define who is a member and who is not. They also police the moral boundaries of the group, which defines what is acceptable and the characteristic behaviour of the members (Davies, 1982). Each ethnic group therefore mock groups that are peripheral to their group or who are seen by them as ambiguous. While this idea of ethnic jokes as police of geographical and social boundaries may apply in some instances, it may not necessarily (as we will soon see

in this essay) apply in instances where members of an ethnic group mock members of their own group. Davies (1982: 383) suggests that ethnic jokes occur in opposed pairs. These pairs include categories such as “stupid and crafty” and “cowardly and militaristic”. Most popular ethnic jokes are those about stupidity, craftiness and stinginess. According to Davies (1982: 384), they are to be found in all the western industrial societies, societies characterised by an advanced capitalist economy, political democracy and social pluralism. Typical examples are ethnic jokes of the British stereotyping the Irish as stupid, Americans portraying the stupidity of the Poles, the Yoruba in Nigeria making jokes about the naive and stupid Hausa people. Human beings sometimes make jokes and laugh when they feel superior to others. This superiority feeling makes the joke producers to see some eminence in themselves which contrasts with the infirmities, weaknesses and follies of others (Boskin & Dorison, 1985).

In the media industry, stereotyping is born of the need to convey information about characters in a simplified way and to inculcate in the audience expectations about the actions of portrayed characters (Casey, *et al.*, 2002). According to Ndoye *et al.* (2015: 45), "stereotypes are significant in comedy because they not only help to establish instantly recognizable behavioural pattern". They went further to state that ethnic stereotyping is thought to be representative characteristics of members of an ethnic group, while they may be considered offensive, other scholars have observed that these stereotypes in jokes can be stripped of their effect once the targets have chosen to laugh at them as well.

Most existing research on ethnic jokes approached it from the sociological perspective. They hint on their use for subversion as well as survival of groups. Thomas Hobbes identified a link between laughter and social rivalry. Gooding (2016) observes that ethnic jokes thrive online because they are hardly regulated. According to him, people are free to hold, share and emote racist ideas in cyberspace (p. 164). However, beyond these sociological explanations of the functions of jokes within groups, the present study will explore such macro-structural elements of ethnic jokes as the ideologies that lie behind them, the attitudes expressed in them

and power relations enacted and contested in the jokes, which are freely shared online.

### **Theoretical Background**

Fairclough (1995) describes language as a social practice, implying that it is not just a mode of representation, but also a socially situated mode of action shaped by the social structure. People's perceptions of the social world are clearly related to how they engage the systems of symbolic forms, forms of meaning, which work to create and support systems of social power. The interaction of people from different backgrounds in a social setting invariably leads to the assignment of people to different categories. Jokes, like many other symbolic linguistic forms, are constructed to communicate, legitimate and instantiate social identities and relations in a variety of discursive contexts. This is especially true of the construction of ethnic jokes where ideas about and attitudes towards a language and its speakers are typically expressed. Such ideas include evaluations of language use and ideas about what language represents or does for people. For instance, ethnic jokes may focus on the appropriate or inappropriate ways to use a language and what a language represents for its speakers. Issues like the ones described above that depict how languages carry or are invested with certain moral, social, and political values, giving rise to implicit assumptions that people have about them are generally referred to as language ideology. Ideology is construed as significations or constructions of reality built into various dimensions of the forms or meanings of discursive practices, which contribute to the production, reproduction, or transformation of relations of power and domination (Fairclough, 1992:87).

This paper applies insights from critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explicate selected Nigerian ethnic jokes, as well as a descriptive analysis. Twenty-five of such jokes were purposively elicited from some social media platforms associated with Nigeria and Nigerians. Since the social media has become major platforms for sharing jokes in Nigeria, it becomes imperative to source the data from these platforms. In what follows in the section, I provide some examples of some popular ethnic jokes and explain how the linguistic forms construct, frame and re-affirm stereotypes about post-colonial subjects in Nigeria.



CDA is appropriate for interpreting the diverse social issues portrayed in jokes. Such issues include ideology, power relations, attitude, gender and ethnic relations. The approach sees the relationship between a discursive event and the situation(s) institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it. Fairclough's (1989, 1995) model for CDA consists three inter-related processes of analysis tied to three inter-related dimensions of discourse. These three dimensions are: the object of analysis (including verbal, visual or verbal and visual texts), which requires a descriptive text analysis; the processes by means of which the object is produced and received (writing/ speaking/designing and reading/listening/viewing) by human subjects, which requires processing analysis (interpretation); and the socio-historical conditions which govern these processes which can be subjected to a social analysis (explanation). The selected jokes were tagged EJ serially for easy referencing and subjected to critical analyses of the discursive features to determine the extent to which they reveal the social identity and ideological positioning of the users on target ethnic groups and the languages they speak.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings from this study shows that ethnic humour in a multilingual/multicultural environment like Nigeria brings out the cognitive states of the humourists, which is deeply rooted in the social structure of the nation. Ethnic jokes can be viewed as discursive expressions of the social representations in the minds of individuals or groups, which they have acquired as a result of socially shared knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and ideologies. This study reveals two major ideas about ethnic jokes. First is Othering and power contest, which signal inclusion or exclusion and manifests consciousness of group identity or solidarity. Second is the construction of stereotypes about linguo-cultural signs. Such stereotypes express attitudes about language and perception of correct speech. In some of such such jokes, parody is employed to project the humour.

### ***Othering and Power Contest***

Nation building in postcolonial Africa, according Tcheuyap (2010: 25) will not be incompatible with laughter, buffoonery and carnival life, which all liberate postcolonial subjects from all anxieties. There is therefore a strong connection between the socio-political life and comedy in postcolonial Africa. The findings reveal that jokes are used as a platform for power contestation among the ethnic groups in Nigeria and stereotypes which already exist are magnified through humour in jokes. Jokes are used to express prejudices, which a group has against the other. Within the Nigerian social context, joke making typically operates along the urban-rural and major-minor ethnic group divides. The urban dwellers humourized the linguistic behaviour of the rural ones. Likewise, the major and minor ethnic groups use jokes to deride one another. Rappoport (2005) observes that ethnic jokes can serve two functions, those of sword and shield. Rappoport's sword and shield metaphor holds that depending on the context, an ethnic joke can be seen either as offensive or defensive. Jokes therefore can signal an expression of power to attack or a means of defence.

Enormous power is invested on the major languages in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), and this gives their speakers a higher social status in the country when compared with the minority languages. Such power reflects in ideologies, especially in derogatory jokes about the minority groups. To illustrate this, below is a joke about an Efik housemaid sent on an errand in the movie Sweet Kokomma.

#### **EJ1 *Kokomma***

Mistress: Go and buy me Eva water<sup>i</sup>, one pack, opposite, run. (On her way, Kokomma, the housemaid met the male house help and the following conversation went on)

Male house help: Where are you going?

Kokomma: Madam say make I go buy Eva water and opposite (*Madam sent me to go and buy Eva water opposite the house*)

Male house help (looking puzzled): Eva water I know, which one be opposite? (*I know Eva water, but I what is opposite*)

Kokomma: Me I never even hear that kind one before o (*I also have never heard about that before*)

Male house help: You never hear and you no fit ask Madam well well, you come dey waka like that dey go (*you've never heard and you cannot as Madam*)

Kokomma: ha, make I go ask Madam that kin question, no. When I get there, we go know. (*How can I ask Madam that kind of question, no. When I get there, I will know*)

After buying the Eva water, Kokoma went about everywhere looking for where to get 'opposite'. She eventually became the laughing stock of everyone she asked and decided to return home. On getting home very late, she was scolded by her mistress who wondered at her stupidity.

This joke reinforces the stereotypical way the Efik people are portrayed in drama and jokes. They are seen through the prisms of servitude and docility and commonly portrayed as daft housemaids with very low level of intelligence. This joke ridicules the intelligence of the Calabar housemaid, Kokomma, who thought 'opposite' means the name of a commodity to be purchased. This stereotypical construction of the Efik minority group arises from the reality in most elite homes in south west Nigerian cities, where a good number of the domestic workers are Efik/Ibibio or other groups in some West African countries like Benin and Togo. They are engaged in domestic work such as cleaning, cooking, caring for children, driving, looking after elderly family members and performing other essential tasks for their employers. Coming from rural and less sophisticated backgrounds, domestic helps could be naïve about the city life and almost every aspect of their behaviour, such as speech and gesture is prone to being ridiculed. Kokomma's trauma in this joke reflects in microcosm the linguistic trauma, which victims of pure *linguicist* ideology suffer in the typical Nigerian

sociolinguistic setting (Philipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1986). The inherent assumption of Kokomma’s boss about homogenous understanding of what she perceived as “proper speech”, which characterises most elitist homes is projected in the humour. This is compounded by Kokomma’s fear and naivety, which is largely a result of her rural social background.

Table 1 below shows the typical stereotypes expressed in Nigerian ethnic jokes

*Table 1, Some common stereotypes in Nigerian ethnic jokes*

Ethnic group	Stereotypes expressed
Yoruba	Love partying and lavishing money, too loud when they speak, boastful, but fearful. Very pugnacious and two-faced
Igbo	Materialistic, and greedy - loves money and can do anything to make money. Industrious but calculative and exploitative in business dealings
Hausa	Uneducated people who can barely string words together to form complete English sentences. Fatalistic and prone to violence, religious bigots
Efik/Ibibio	Girls are hypersexual and promiscuous, good cooks and good home keepers; lovers of dog meat (404)
Edo/Delta	Men - smart, witty swindlers and criminal-minded; ladies - prostitutes
Benue State	Men love the bar and pepper-soup life, while the women love sex, and do not see anything wrong with a woman sleeping with her husband’s best friend

Source: Taiwo 2018: p. 29

On the other hand, it was also observed by Adebani & Obadare (2011: 6ff) that the power to laugh, and the right to be laughed at is assumed to be the minimal constituent of the social groups outside the hegemonic power structure (the subaltern), who never miss an opportunity to entertain themselves. According to

them, "ridicule may be seen as a 'weapon of the weak' in public life and the ridiculous and the ridiculed are often the powerful and the superior" (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2011: 7). One reality about the humour industry in Nigeria is the contest of power by the minority. These minority groups, especially from Edo, Delta, and other southern states of Nigeria seem to have perfected the art of humour. A lot of humorist and stand-up comedians have emerged from this region of Nigeria who seem to popularise ethnic jokes that target the majority groups. These stand-up comedians tap into the nation's enduring ability to find laughter in the bleakest moments, sometimes in its collective misery itself. While the majority ethnic groups hold political and economic and linguistic power, the social power (the level of talent and skills needed to exert influence over other Nigerians, and enhance social cohesion) lies in the hands of the minority groups. The minority groups represented by these humourists become the influencing agents with the social power to make people laugh, thereby releasing their social tension inflicted by repressive governance. This comical power of the minority groups in Nigeria undermine the potency of the prejudices against them in some ways. For instance, they start off by making jokes about their own groups, thereby breaking down the original stereotype boundaries and making it harder to perpetuate these stereotypes. The jokes below about Warri were culled from jokes on social media.

**EJ2: Warri Boys**

Warri boys, no joke with Warri boys o, na only Warri where you go dey, den go tief your fowl, kill am, come take am cook soup, call your pikin make e come chop, so that when you swear, the swear go kill everybody.

*(Don't joke with Warri boys. It is only in Warri that someone would steal another person's fowl, kill it and make some soup with it and call the person's child to join in the feast, knowing that if the owner decides curse the thief, the child would also be cursed)*

Akpororo's Joke on Youtube

**EJ3: Akpos and Onome**

Akpos knocked on the gate of a brothel in a red light district. The madam opened the brothel door to see a young man called Akpos. His clothes were all tattered and he looked needy.

Can I help you?" the madam asked.??

I want Onome," Akpos replied.

Young Man, Onome is one of our most expensive ladies, perhaps someone else..."??

No, I must see Onome." Akpos replied. Just then Onome appeared and announced to Akpos that she charges N50,000 per visit.??

Akpos never blinked and reached into his pocket and handed her fifty pieces of N1,000 n notes. The two went up to a room for an hour whereupon Akpos calmly left.

The next night he appeared again demanding Onome. Onome explained that no one had ever come back two nights in a row and that there were no discounts. it was still N50,000. Again Akpos took out the money, the two went up to the room and he calmly left an hour later

When Akpos showed up the third consecutive night, no one could believe it. Again he handed Onome the money and up to the room they went.

At the end of the hour Onome questioned

Akpos: "No one has ever used my services three nights in a row... where are you from?"??

Akpos replied, "I am from Warri." "Really?" replied Onome, "I have a brother who lives there and does business."??

Yes; I know," Akpos replied. "He gave me N150,000 to give to you.

Nairaland:<https://www.nairaland.com/2608091/joke-day-akpos-onome-brothel>

**EJ4: Warri and Igbo Guys**

Three Warri guys and three Igbo guys were travelling by train from Enugu to Lagos to attend a conference. At the station, the three Igbo guys bought tickets each and watched as the three Warri guys buys only a single ticket. "How are three people going to travel on only one ticket?" asked one of the Igbo guys. "Watch and you'll see," replied a Warri guy. They all boarded the train. The Igbo guys took their respective seats, but all three Warri guys cram into a restroom and closed the door behind them. Shortly after the train had departed, the conductor comes around, collecting tickets. He knocks on the restroom door and says, "Ticket, please." The door opens just a crack and a single arm emerges with a ticket in hand. The conductor takes it and moves on. The Igbo guys saw this and agreed it was quite a clever idea. So after the conference, the Igbo guys decided to copy the Warri guys on the return trip and save some money (being clever with money!). When they got to the station, they bought a single ticket for the return trip. To their astonishment, the Warri guys bought no tickets at all. "How are you going to travel without a ticket?" asked one perplexed Igbo guy. "Watch and you'll see," replied a Warri guy. When they boarded the train the three Igbo guys cram into a restroom and the three Warri guys cram into another one nearby. The train departs. Shortly afterward, one of the Warri guys leaves his restroom and walks over to the restroom where the Igbo guys were hiding. He knocks on the door and says; "Ticket please"

<https://www.nairaland.com/3022761/when-warri-guy-shows-he>

Jokes targeted at Warri people are popularised mainly by stand-up comedians from the area. Warri is often referred to as an emerging comedy capital in the southern part of Nigeria (Emedolibe, 2014). The region has become a source of materials for comedians. The popular saying in Nigerian Pidgin, *Warri no dey carry last* (Warri people would never come last) refers to the witty and smart behaviour that have come to characterise the people of Warri. The jokes above present Warri people as fraudulent people who would always outsmart anyone. These jokes portray Warri people as smart and highly intelligent criminals, who would never get caught in the act, as can be seen in the EJ12 – EJ14. These jokes project the socio-economic context of the nation and the brazen financial criminality that characterise the terrain, all having something to do with Warri. The current economic ideology that operates in Nigeria has created two stratified classes within Nigeria; a wealthy, politically influential upper class funded by oil wealth and a poor lower class without access to representation or social mobility. One way the masses and marginalised minority, symbolised by Warri boys, *Akpos*, *Onome* and Igbo boys, resist legitimization and the unfair economic ideology which has worsened inequality, is brazenness, impudence, criminality and total disregard for the law.

Nigeria can generally be described as a conservative society, although the south is considerably more liberal in comparison with the North. Perpetuation of authoritarian governance by both the military and civilian in the postcolonial period has suppressed, to a large extent, public expression. However, this has changed due to the liberalisation of telecommunication and information flow in the early 1990s, which allows for more civic engagement through the digital media. The effect of this liberalisation is however more visible in the southern part of the country due to the level of education and awareness. The inhabitants of Warri and their way of life form raw materials for substantial portion of the jokes propelling Nigeria's comic industry. According to Richard Mofe-Damijo, the Delta State Commissioner for Culture and Tourism and a leading Nollywood actor,



Warri is a place where most of the present young comedians come from. Warri has become a source of materials for comedians. So, we said to ourselves ‘Since the original boys are there, why not go back home and bring the people who really are the originators of the jokes that people tell. That was what gave birth to ‘Made in Warri. *National Mirror*, October 8, 2014.

Warri is a major reference as the origin of humour among the minority groups in Nigeria. This kind of view has, to some extent stripped Warri of the stereotype of a centre for fighting, crises and hostage by reconstructing it as the home of quality entertainment.

Stereotype humour about the minority people plays out in the creation of characters in jokes. Typical examples are seen in Kokomma (the rustic and naive Calabar housemaid) and Akpos (the smart and witty Warri character) exemplified in EJ1 – EJ3. Akpos is a cyber trickster hero created in Nigerian jokes. Typically, a male character, Akpos has been given different characters in popular jokes, which include: a father, witty student, teacher, pastor, drunk, lover, son, job applicant, businessman, governor, and so forth. Akpos jokes have been popularised in Nigerian humour in the cyberspace (Yeku, 2015). Akpos is a comic character created in *Facebook* and *Twitter* tales as well as cartoons. The name Akpos is carved out from names from Urhobo and Isoko ethnic groups in the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria. It is the short form for the name Akpororo (hot). The name started becoming popular when Bovi, a popular stand-up comedian adopted it in some episodes of AY Live Television Show. It was however popularised as the name for a major comic character in Nigerian cyber jokes on *Facebook*, *Twitter* and other social media platforms.

The kind of power contest between the majority and minority is different from the one among the major ethnic groups. Jokes become arrow and shield in the hands of these major groups, one against the other as can be seen in the following jokes:

**EJ5: *Hausa, Igbo Swallowing Fruits***

An Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba man entered a forest where there were cannibals. The cannibals said they will not eat them if they swallow 10 fruits without any impression on their face and it must all be the same. Yoruba man brought orange and swallowed till the fifth, he choked and they killed him. The Igbo man brought strawberries and swallowed till d 9th he started laughing so they carried him and killed him. So, in heaven the Yoruba saw d Igbo man and asks why he started laughing when he reached d ninth, the Igbo man said 'as I wanted to swallow the 10th one I saw d Hausa man coming with 10 water melons.

<https://www.nairaland.com/2000355/unbelievable-read-laugh>

**EJ6: *The Wrong Transaction***

A man mistakenly deposited the sum of 2 million Naira into a wrong account. He figured out the best way to retrieve his money and he sent a text message to the phone of the account holder. "The money I just paid into your account is for your initiation into the Black Star Occult group. The initiation comes up tomorrow. During the initiation, you will be expected to donate a member of your immediate family to be killed and the blood sucked by the group. You will be expected to do this every year to renew your covenant. Don't forget to bring a syringe and needle to draw your blood for initiation. If, however you are not interested, please return the money to the following account no: 00943..." After some minutes, he got a text message "Thank you for the message. I'm interested. Please another friend is also interested, can he send his a/c no?" Which

Nigerian tribe do you think this text sender is from?

<https://www.nairaland.com/3373593/guy-mistakenly-transferred-200k-someone>

**EJ7: *Heart Transplant***

A Yoruba man needed a heart transplant, but prior to the surgery the doctors needed to store his blood type in case the need arises for blood donation. Because the gentleman had a rare type of blood, it couldn't be found locally. So, the call went out to a number of countries. Finally, an Igbo man was located who had the same blood type and who was willing to donate his blood to the Yoruba man. After the surgery, the Yoruba sent the Igbo man a thank-you card for giving his blood along with an expensive diamond and a new Rolls Royce car as a token of his appreciation. Unfortunately, the Yoruba had to go through a corrective surgery once again. His doctors called the Igbo who was more than happy to donate his blood again. After the second surgery, the Yoruba man sent the Igbo a Thank You card and a box of sweets. The Igbo was shocked to see that the Yoruba man this time did not acknowledge the Igbo's kind gesture in the same way as he had done the first time. So, he phoned the Yoruba and asked him why he had expressed his appreciation in not a very generous manner. The Yoruba replied, "You forget, I have Igbo blood in me now!"

<https://www.nairaland.com/560677/igbo-yoruba-man>

The three jokes above are used to reinforce the existing stereotypes people have about the major ethnic groups in the country. Despite that the joke about fruit swallowing ridicules the three major

Nigerian ethnic groups for lacking resilience, the butt of the joke is the Hausa man who is constructed not just as stupid, but whose stupidity led to the death of the purportedly most resilient Igbo man. This joke blends the subject of resilience and stupidity, as it shows that even in the face of apparent threat to their lives, Nigerians can still laugh at themselves. They would rather, in the words of the popular English comedian, Charlie Chaplin, "take their pain and play with it". The Igbo man could laugh at the stupidity of the Hausa man, having the feeling of superiority, even at his own peril. This same feeling of superiority is evoked in the audience when they listen to jokes about the stupidity or undesirable qualities of other tribal groups or individuals. The Igbo man knew the Hausa man's stupidity spells his doom, but he chose to laugh at his own peril. The joke clearly shows that in the Nigerian ethnic relations context, self-lacerating humour cannot be repressed, even in the face of pervasive social suffering. The people could as well "laugh and die" rather than suppress their laughter.

Despite the fact that the joke on the wrong transaction (EJ6) deliberately did not identify any specific ethnic group as its butt, based on mutual knowledge, the answer to the question that ends the joke can easily be guessed by any Nigerian. The joke is quite dramatic as it moves to a climax with dreadful threat to the man into whose account the sum of 2 million Naira was mistakenly paid. The humour in the joke is reinforced by the question "Which Nigerian tribe do you think this text sender is from?" While the sender of the money thought, he had issued out a threat that would compel the receiver to return the money that was mistakenly paid into his account, the latter plays even smarter, thereby foreclosing the possibilities of returning the money. The joke portrays the Igbo people as opportunists, who are ready to take any risk and make money through any means. This joke may be articulating resistance in the relationship of power between the Igbo and others, since it exemplifies the "smartness" and daring nature of an Igbo person, thereby diminishing the generally held ideological group beliefs and attitudes about the Igbo people. The butt of this joke is the person who mistakenly made the transaction, but failed to get his money back in spite of his ploy.

The Igbo ethnic group have become the butt in many ethnic jokes as people ridicule their propensity to getting wealth and exploitation in business. The joke on heart transplant magnifies this with the metaphorisation of the "Igbo blood". The whole idea is that the attitude to money typically associated with the Igbo ethnic group is a genetic thing - it runs in their blood. This joke portrays an ingrate Yoruba man who would rather laugh at the Igbo man who saved his life twice by donating his blood on the two occasions. The same blood that saved him became the subject of the ridicule. While this joke emphasises the perceived "bad properties" of the kind Igbo man, it further reproduces the bias generally held by Yoruba people about the Igbo.

The absurdity and the ridiculous touch in jokes sometimes make them humorous. The following joke below has a story line that one would consider almost impossible in any ideal situation, especially in an Igbo Christian marriage, which is being portrayed in the joke.

**EJ8: *The Igbo Multimillionaire Adulterer***

An Igbo multi-millionaire-Chief, to maintain a mistress in Lagos, bought a house In Lekki-Victoria Garden City (in his own name) for her to live in, plus a monthly allowance of N500,000. The house cost him about N75m in 2005. He sold the house last week for N225m, after they broke up. A quick calculation shows that after 5 years of a fling with the woman, he still had a net gain of N114m plus six years of free sex. When his wife found out, she was very mad at him and gave him a big mouthful. She yelled at him: "BLOODY IDIOT!!! Why the hell didn't you keep two mistresses?"

[www.naijabokofjokes.com](http://www.naijabokofjokes.com)

This joke is on how the millionaire's wife's business sense and exploitative tendencies made her completely blind to a five-year injustice done to her by her husband. Rather than being jealous and getting angry with her husband for cheating on her, she sanctioned

his act and wished the husband had “kept two mistresses”. This appears like an exaggeration of the extent an Igbo person can go to make money, even at the expense of personal hurt. The witty business opportunities identified in a condemnable adulterous relationship is what produces the humour of derogatory stereotype of the Igbo by other ethnic groups in the country.

### ***Stereotypes about Language***

The focus in this section is on language ideology, which encompasses all the explicit and implicit attitudes about language that define what is perceived as "proper" speech (Agbedo, n.d.). Jokes about ethnic groups in Nigeria also target how people from these ethnic groups speak naturally, what they speak about and what language represents for them. For instance, jokes about speech mimicking focus on accents of members of these ethnic groups when they speak English.

#### **EJ9: *Hausa and Yoruba Accent***

U ask Yoruba babe of her phone number..u go hear, “sero hate sero, sis hate sis, tiri hate tiri, sefun noi (08068638379) my hem tihen nober.. (my MTN number)

Hausa Guy: “tzero seben tzero, pipe pipe seben, por pipe por, eleben (0705 5745411) na my Gilo numva vee dat (my Glo number)

<https://www.facebook.com/770192133049215/posts/if-u-ask-yoruba-babe-of-her-phone-numberu-go-hear-sero-hate-sero-sis-hate-sis-ti/781527391915689/>

#### **EJ10: *Yoruba and Calabar Accent***

Yoruba man and Calabar man were playing card (whot) so the Yoruba man won the Calabar man, and started shouting "i don win u na me be *sampion*" (*I have won, I am the champion*). So the Calabar man said "see yeye man wey dey col *yampion sampion*,

hahahahaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"  
(look at an unserious man, who is pronouncing  
yampion as sampion)  
<https://www.gistmania.com/talk/topic.77034.msg2356243.html>

**EJ11: Igbo Accent**

IGBOS!!!!!! Even if they were born and bred inside Cambridge University, the accent remains very strong!!! Ask an Igbo "professor in English Linguistics" to pronounce the following:

**oil**, you will hear **oyel**

**develop**, and you will hear **develope**,

**prepare**, you will hear **preparr**

They even originated the word, "severally".

Igbo accent is a disease that is near incurable!!!!

[www.naijabookofjokes.com](http://www.naijabookofjokes.com)

Laughing at one another's accent is a very common thing in Nigeria. Despite the fact that an average Nigerian speaks English as a second language, the people have been able to note the wrong pronunciations and accents typical of less educated people and make them subjects of jokes. Sounds that are absent in many Nigerian languages are usually approximated. For instance, in Hausa, /p/ becomes /f/ (*people*; in Yoruba and Urhobo, /tʃ/ becomes /ʃ/; in Efik/Ibibio, /tʃ/ becomes /j/; as in Joke 10; in Igbo, the diphthong /ea/ becomes /a:/, and so forth. In spite of the linguistic stereotypes expressed in EJ10, the joke brings out elements of mutual ignorance of the correct pronunciation in the Yoruba and Efik characters, thereby making the laughter mutual and the humour as a social unifier rather than a social separator. The incongruous comparison of the Igbo accent to an incurable disease is humorous, especially when accents are not meant to be socially judged due to their origin in socio-cognitive processes which every speaker goes through.

Elements of exaggeration come into some ethnic jokes, as one can see in EJ11. The hyperbolic expression "Even if they were born and bred inside Cambridge University, the accent remains very strong!!!" This is an exaggerated statement used to heighten to

humorous content of the joke. The surprise this outrageous expression produces since it runs against our expectation is the basis for the funniness of the joke. Humour arises here with the idea of a Cambridge born person speaking with a strong Igbo accent.

Apart from mimicking of accents in jokes, ethnic jokes also mock the way a group of people are perceived to be speaking and what they typically speak about. For instance, jokes are commonly made about the Yoruba as being too 'loud, boastful and too respectful.

**EJ12: Yoruba People are so loud!**

I don't know exactly, but it appears impossible to say certain words in Yoruba without the accompanying gestures and facial expressions and of course volume. Over time this can tend to make these people keep their voice boxes at that default high volume in which most Yoruba words are spoken. The vocal ability of a Yoruba man is double that of the average human being!

<https://www.nairaland.com/5365861/yorubas-naturally-loud-opinion>

**EJ13: Yoruba - too respectful**

Yoruba people are so over-respectful, that they will kneel down at the ATM machine after receiving their cash and say 'Oshe sir (Thank you Sir)'.  
Yoruba people tend to prostrate on the phone when greeting, as if the person on the other end of the line can see them.

<https://ynaija.com/yoruba-people-loud-absurd-generalization-fact/>

Two key aspects of the Yoruba linguistic behaviour are highlighted in EJ13 – loudness and overt display of respect. In EJ12, describing the vocal ability of a Yoruba man as double that of an average human being is an exaggeration meant to generate laughter. A similar



hyperbolic construction of the manifestations of “respect” in the most unlikely contexts of technology can also be seen in EJ 13.

The Igbo are constructed, especially among the Yoruba as aggressive in their speech and always talking about money, and unlike the Yoruba, lacking any respect form in their language. This conception of what the Igbo people often talk about is deeply rooted in well-known Igbo socio-economic reality imbued in the spirit of resilience and entrepreneurship, the goal of which is to create wealth. Jokes are therefore created in which Igbo persons make reference to money and showcase their business acumen even in the most unlikely circumstances, such as in EJ14 below.

**EJ14: Igbo men and money**

An Igbo man fell into a well and was screaming for help. The wife came with a rope to help, the Igbo man looked at the rope and asked “how much dd you buy the rope?” The wife replied “1000 Naira”. Still inside the well, he shouted, “whaaat!” Return it right now, go to Papa Emeka at the 4<sup>th</sup> street, he sells his own for 300 Naira. Hurry up pls before I die here  
[www.naijabookofjokes.com](http://www.naijabookofjokes.com)

This joke is an exaggeration of the stereotype of an avaricious Igbo man, who could still imagine and actually talk about insignificant financial gain at the expense of his life. Making jokes about what people often talk about is targeted at ridiculing their cognitive perception of the world and construct them as being excessively concerned about what others are less concerned about, even to ridiculous extents.

The Hausa are mocked for speaking bad English due to their low educational attainment because of their negative attitude to Western education. Their speech is also mocked for excessive interjection of religious expressions, such as *walahi*, *Alah*, and so forth. One comedian in Nigeria who is noted for parodying Hausa accent in the delivery of his jokes is *Aboki 4 Christ*. He constructs “the character of a Hausa in terms of language, mannerisms, gestures, interjections and the subjects treated in his jokes” (Imo, 2018: 19).

**EJ15: Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa in Airplane**

Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa were in an airplane that was about to crash and there was only one parachute. The Igbo man took it and jumped, the Yoruba man followed suit and held Igbo man's leg, but Hausa man said '**walahi walahi na competition be dis fa**' so he jumped and survived with a broken leg and said 'I am very brave'.

<https://www.nairaland.com/560677/igbo-yoruba-man>

The butt of the joke in EJ15 is the Hausa man meant to be derogatorily portrayed as foolish for regarding the act of jumping from an airplane as a competition. As generally expected, the Hausa man engaged in code alternation (Hausa – English - Pidgin) to signify his deficiency in English.

While inter-ethnic jokes are subjects of national discourse, there are also intra-ethnic jokes, which are jokes about sub-ethnic groups. For instance, certain sub-ethnic groups among the Yoruba, such as the Ijebu are derided for being tight-fisted and the Ijesa as being thrifty. According to Falola & Adebayo (2000: 12), due to their closeness to the coast, the Ijebu people derived so much benefits from contacts with their European trade partners in the colonial era to the extent that their Oyo counterparts stereotype them as shrewd business people. This stereotype has now spread within Yoruba land and all over the nation and it has festered in the context of intra-ethnic jokes made about the Ijebu people. Jokes are also often made about the Ijebu as a people who are believed to starve themselves during the week to save for lavish weekend parties.

The Ijesa on the other hand are known to be traders who cannot be easily cheated on money matters. They are known to be highly mobile cloth merchants who would do everything possible including embarrassing the debtor by punishing themselves squatting, instead of sitting conveniently, to recover debts owed them. This is the origin of the expression *osomaalo gb'owo mi* 'I will only squat to recover my money'. EJ16 below presents some stereotypical jocular sayings about Ijebu people.

**EJ 16: Ijebu Stereotypes**

Only Ijebu people sell Ticket to their wedding party  
Ijebu people will never say “DO NOT URINATE HERE”,  
they will say “URINATE HERE AND LOSE YOUR CHILD  
Only an Ijebu man will speak Yoruba to a white man and he  
will understand. Jazz things

An Ijebu-man will never forget to ask for his ‘change’ no  
matter how little it is ... after sending you on an errand

[https://www.facebook.com/roseaffair/posts/top\\_-20-funny-facts-about-ijebu-people-in-nigeriabelow-are-their-behaviours-and-c/954992727849492/](https://www.facebook.com/roseaffair/posts/top_-20-funny-facts-about-ijebu-people-in-nigeriabelow-are-their-behaviours-and-c/954992727849492/)

Two major stereotypes associated with the Ijebu people are thriftiness and fetishism. These stereotypes are strongly constructed in every joke about Ijebu people in addition to their love for parties.

Other countless jokes are made about ethnic and sub-ethnic groups, which portray the perception of other groups about them. These jokes are ingrained in the collective norms and they become inseparable from the people. The subliminal perceptions buried in these jokes become realities to the people of the country and the tendency for every Nigerian to laugh at themselves becomes the binding force for the pluralistic groups.

Perceptual understanding of people through their linguistic behaviour and constructing public jokes out of such perceptions, especially in multilingual settings like Nigerian and in online platforms could actually become Nigerians’ peaceful way of lessening tension, relieving hostilities and creating social bonding in the context of poor socio-economic realities. The fact that everyone, including the targets of the jokes is amused by these jokes, makes them to be seen as a co-construction of the experience of Nigerianness to the outer group.

### Conclusion

This study traced the popularisation of ethnic humour to postcolonial Nigeria after the series of political violence witnessed in the country, after her independence, which later culminated in military interference in the politics. All these led to an intense ethnic polarisation, which continues till date. Humour generally has become a means of socio-cultural improvisation, a means of coping with the harsh socio-economic realities of the pluralistic public sphere in postcolonial Nigeria. This study has been able to show how ethnic humour has been taken beyond the face-to-face confines to the cyberspace without stripping it of the typical expression of stereotypes. Applying the insights of critical discourse analysis, the study explicated through everyday ethnic jokes in Nigeria how majority and minority groups in the country construct Otherness, power, stereotypes and ideologies about themselves. In addition, it demonstrates how the potency of prejudices created through jokes are undermined by the ability of Nigerians laugh collectively at their stereotyped attitudes, as well as their socio-cultural and linguistic behaviours.

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