

# Stand Up Comedy and Economic Recession in Nigeria

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## Abstract

One of the major issues of concern of the Nigerian government and her citizenry in the era of economic recession is on how to create employment and generate wealth for the masses so as to ameliorate poverty. Certainly, stand-up comedy as a genre of theatre provides soft landing ground for theatre artists in Nigeria in the recent times. This study, therefore, takes a critical look at stand-up comedy as theatre arts form. It goes further to analyse the place of stand-up comedy in charting a survival agenda in the Nigerian ailing economy. As a way of increasing employment and wealth generation, the paper suggests that theatre should properly be funded by the government, while efforts should also be redoubled by theatre professionals to increase the production of stand-up comedy in Nigeria as this would boost not only the revenue base of artists but the nation as a whole.

## Introduction

Theatre has been used as important element in the search for solutions to economic recession in most parts of the world. For instance, the government of United States of America under President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1937, pumped huge sums of money into the theatre during the American depression period and that improved the economy because the sector engaged more people and created new jobs. Similarly, in the early 1990's when Japan was on economic recession, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry supported and funded the Cannes festival with huge sums of money. During the festival, two competitions were promoted: the international competition which awarded distinguished prizes in several categories, and the Young Cinema competition for new directors, the winners which received substantial cash prizes from corporate sponsors to help finance their next film. The festival also sponsored several non-competitive programmes, including an animation series; a fantastic film festival; women's film week and a Japanese film masters programmes which featured not fewer than 35 films by Japanese motion picture director, Ozu Yasujiro in the 1992 festival. The Young Cinema competition however, got the most attention from the festival's average of 150,000 attendees and most of the films in this programme were released in Japan cities later in the year (Tino, 1). The theatre has remained important because it helps in creating awareness, wealth and also engaging a lot of hands in terms of employment generation.

In Nigeria, stand-up comedy as genre of theatre has similarly served as employment and revenue generating source. It has helped and continues to help in enhancing not only the revenue based of artists but the nation a whole thereby providing solutions to economic recession as well as contributing to Nigerian national development. In this paper therefore, examines stand-up comedy vis-à-vis economic recession. It considers stand-up comedy as a viable means of providing solutions to economic recession in Nigeria.

## Stand-Up Comedy

Stand-up comedy according to Wikipedia Encyclopedia refers to:

*A comic style in which a comedian performs in front of a live audience, speaking directly to them. The performer, known as a comic, stand-up comic, stand-up comedian or, simply, a stand-up, usually recites a fast-paced succession of humorous stories, short jokes, called "bits"*

*and one-liners, which constitute what is typically called, a monologue, foutine or act. Some stand-up comedians use props, music, or magic tricks, to enhance their acts. Stand-up comedy is often performed in comedy clubs, bars, neo-burlesques, colleges, and theatres.*

It is an art form that is concerned with making people laugh at the instance of a joke cracked by the stand-up comedian. Stand-up comedy requires the congregated audience to laugh instantly just as jokes are made by the comedian on the spot. It is an art form that is unique in its nature in the sense that it can be performed on or outside the stage. A comic appears before an audience in outrageous outfit, drag or corporate fashion in the course of his/her performance. This kind of entertainment through jokes cracking makes the audience to laugh continuously from beginning to the end of the performance which may last for 30 minutes, one hour or even more. The intent of the comedian according to Barclays Ayakorama is “not the audience critical perception of the message, but the eliciting of laughter or smile over jokes of or vulgar jibs (474).

The origin of stand-up comedy is dated back to the 1800's. However, from the 1940's, stand-up comedy performances became more dominant especially in America. Comedy star Milton Berle popularly known as “Uncle Milty”, was National Broadcasting Company's (NBC's) chief attraction. He was the forerunner of television stand-up comedy. He stood on the stage and told jokes. Berle comic was the kind of entertainment phenomenon that drove many Americans to buy television. Bob Hope and others followed in Berle's footsteps. Comedy combined with music on NBC to form variety shows, such as “Your Show of Shows” (1950-1950) with Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca (MacDonald, 1994).

The Columbian Broadcasting System (CBS) also had its own stand-up comics such as George Burns and Gracie Allen. Crop of comedians that sprang up in America in the 1970's included George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Robert Klein, Jerry Seinfeld, Richard Lewis, Billy Crystal, Freddie Prinze, Richard Belzer, Larry David, and Steve Martin. The business of stand-up comedy started to boom not only in America but other parts of the world as well.

In Nigeria, stand-up comedy had been in existence since time immemorial, however, what can be referred to as modern stand-up comedy actually made its debut in the 1970's. Over the years, the art form has recorded significant development. Some of the prominent stand-up comedians over the years include John Chukwu (JC), Ali Baba, Tony St. Iyke, Jude Away Away, AY, Tee-A, Gbenga Adeyinka, Oma-Oma, Basket Mouth, Julius Agwu, Richard Mofe Damijo (RMD), Okey Bakassi, Akpororo, Acapella, I go dye, Gorden Klint d drunk, Bovi, I go save, Funny Bone, MC Aman, Onome Da Saint. Others are Kpof Kpof, Yongest Old Man, Francis Duru, Dr Ayuba, Fred Bright, Wahala, De General, De Governor, Holy Mallam, Meleke, Senator, Funny Bone, Kofi, Jedi, Funky Mallam, Gordon, Otota-G4, Owen G. Owen-T, Ogbolo Singer, David Simpa, MC Abe, De Don, Markus McKane, Oke Mama, Baba Igos, Ogun Baba, Sim Card, Chief Mosusu, Alegbe, Lepacious Bose, Princes, and MC Tagweye.

The long list of the Nigerian stand-up comedians is a clear indication that the art form is a lucrative business capable of changing lives and providing employment for the unemployed. Owing to the fact that stand-up comedy has succeeded in changing lives of a proportion of Nigerian population, especially in the era of economic recession, thereby enjoying big patronage among Nigerian audience, it has become imperative to undertake a study on this demanding subject so as to critically ascertain its economic value to Nigerians in general and the nation in particular.

### **Economic Recession**

Economic recession on the other hand refers to “significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in real gross domestic product (GDP), real income, employment, industrial production and wholesale-retail sales” (<http://WWW.naij.com>).

The ugly side of recession is that, business ceases to expand, the GDP diminishes for two consecutive quarters, housing prices decline while the rate of unemployment rises. The causes of economic recession in Nigeria include: high inflation, a general rise in prices of goods and services leading to low purchasing power; accumulation of debts servicing especially foreign debts; high interest rates discouraging investors; fall in aggregate demand, fall in wages, income; and mass unemployment and general loss of confidence on the government due to economic indices. Some economists have attributed economic recession to poor economic planning by successive governments. One of the greatest challenges of Nigerian government in the era of economic recession is unemployment. Therefore, as a rescue measure, government should partner with the private organizations to organize entrepreneurship and skill acquisition programme for the youth. In other words, government should invest in skills acquisition, IT, telecommunication, agro allied, sports, arts among others. There should be multiple competences, particularly among youths as a major to curb increase in global joblessness. On this note, the efforts of stand-up comedians in Nigeria need to be appreciated. This area alone has created employment to an uncountable number of youths. Today, as a result of hard work and creativity, most comedians are doing well in terms of settling their bills as well as good business investments.

### **Stand-up Comedy and Economic Recession in Nigeria**

The role of stand-up comedy in the period of Nigeria's economic recession cannot be ignored. The art form has a lot of functions ranging from entertainment, education, sensitization and conscientization of the audience. One of the economic functions of stand-up comedy, according to Williams Onogu is:

*Stand-up comedy has functions to improve the standard of living of many Nigerians. The art is lucrative for self-employment. Many youth comfortably make a living from it. Internationally, stand-up comedy has helped to bring artists to limelight who travelled abroad to sell their art on various occasions. African countries like Ghana and South Africa have been relentlessly patronizing Nigerian comedy films. Economically, stand-up comedy is enabling comedians to pay their bills and equally put food on their table (361).*

The economic function of stand-up comedy is critical in addressing unemployment which is one of the major aspects of economic recession in Nigeria. The rise and development of stand-up comedy in the words of Barclays Ayakoroma means "that the comedians, like their Nollywood counterparts, have been smiling to the banks after every show. A job which was once looked down upon as nothing, just like music in the 70's, is now a craft that rakes in millions (482). It may interest you to know that comedians are now making a lot of investments, driving expensive cars. According to Osagie Alonge:

*Ali Baba maintains an expensive hobby, collecting cars, and bought a wine colour Mercedes Benz SL 500 Valued at ₦20 Million. Julius Agwu bought a gold-coloured Benz GL550, a 7 seater SUV that cost ₦19M, for his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. Teju Babyface acquired a Lexus LS 600 Hybrid executive car, which selling price is ₦12M, though he had been driving a Toyota Land Cruiser. AY acquired a white Acura "ZDX AS" as Christmas present for his wife, Mabel, costing ₦9M. Bovi who had been under the tutelage of Basket Mouth' also bought for his wife, Christabel, a Range Rover, estimated at ₦8.5M. Buchi, in early January, acquired a white 2009 Land Rover Discovery 3, which goes for ₦8M. And Basket Mouth, host of "The Big Friday Show" drives a 2011 Toyota Venza, worth ₦6.5M (1-2).*

Comedy in Nigeria has now become a money making venture. Quite a good number of comedians earn their living in millions of naira in performances in Nigeria and abroad from only stand-up comedy. Famous comedians like Ali Baba and Basket Mouth command top ticket prices, earning not less than ₦500,000:00 for a two hours single event. Agoma Awaritoma confirms that:

*These groups are constantly being invited to perform for Nigerians in the Diaspora (USA and Europe). And like football stars, they are getting an endorsement that runs into millions. It is no longer a secret that most of these first class stand-up comedians charge over One Million Naira per performance, an event that may not span threehours (65).*

Stand-up comedians make good money for making people laugh. In the words of Lepacious Bose (cited in Zik Zulu Okafor, 2006), “the comedy business is fast becoming an industry and has been growing in the last 10 years due to the innovations introduced by Ali Baba. He taught us branding and make us realized that it the way we present our jokes and ourselves that determines how we are paid and respected (6). Since stand-up comedy has now become an employment creation, industry with the prospects of generating revenue to both individuals as well as government in Nigeria, it is therefore, recognized as one of the veritable tools in the quest for survival and solutions to economic recession in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has stated that stand-up comedy has helped in proffering solutions to economic recession in Nigeria. Although stand-up comedy is performed mainly for entertainment, information, education, sensitization, conscientization among other functions, the art form has, undoubtedly boosted the revenue base of not only comedians but Nigerian nation as well. It is our belief that government and theatre artists should pay more attention to stand-up comedy since this is one truthful way of revamping our collapsed economy. The efforts of Ali Baba, Basket Mouth, I Go Die, Okey Bakassi, Julius Agwu, Lepacious Bose, just to mention but a few should serve as a motivating factor for emerging comedians if continuous solutions to economic recession in Nigeria must be maintained.

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