

# THE USES OF RIDICULE: HUMOUR, 'INFRAPOLITICS' AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN NIGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

As post-military 'democratic' regimes across Africa perpetuate norms and practices that were characteristic of the previous openly authoritarian era, humour and ridicule have emerged as a means through which ordinary people attempt to deconstruct and construct meaning out of a reality that is decidedly surreal. In Nigeria jokes serve a double function as a tool for subordinate classes to deride the state (including its agents) and themselves. Jokes are therefore a means through which an emergent civil society, 'behaving badly', subverts, deconstructs, and engages with the state. Yet, for all its significance as a form of agency, humour has been neglected in the civil society literature, partly because of the mentality which frames civil society in terms of organizations (humour is not organized), and partly because of its almost exclusive attention to the 'civil' attributes of civil society (humour is, *inter alia*, rude). This article argues for incorporating humour into the civil society discourse, and suggests that doing so will enrich civil society analysis by focusing on both the constructions of sociality and their associated politics, and the hidden spaces in which most of visible political action originates.

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Not by wrath does one kill, but by laughter.<sup>1</sup>

Laughter represents an unofficial and subversive means of expression, a freedom in the midst of restrictions.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Kessinger Publishing, Montana, MT, 2004), p. 304.

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Paula Findlen, 'Between carnival and lent: the scientific revolutions at the margins of culture', *Configurations* 6, 2 (1998) p. 249.

IN JUNE 1998, NIGERIA'S ONE-TIME RULER, GENERAL SANI ABACHA, who had ruled the roost with exceptional severity, suddenly gave up the ghost. Relief at his passing was expressed both in Nigeria and internationally. The late tyrant had been a law unto himself, jailing opposition elements arbitrarily (most famously the winner of the annulled June 1993 presidential election, Moshood Abiola), assassinating critical leaders of the pro-democracy movement, driving countless others into exile, and putting the nation itself under lock and key. In November 1995, in defiance of judicial process and international opinion, Abacha ordered the hanging of the writer and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists, while the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting was convening in Auckland, New Zealand. His unexpected demise was therefore welcome news.

Following Abacha's death, a seemingly benign and somewhat lacklustre General Abdulsalam Abubakar, Chief of Defence Staff under the late ruler, was installed as head of state, whereupon there began a process of rolling back the tanks of terror that (literally and metaphorically) Abacha had deployed on the streets of Nigeria. Taking advantage of the new air of relative freedom, Gbenga Adeboye, one of the most popular jokesters and radio presenters in western Nigeria, told his listeners a joke about what happened when the late Abacha arrived at the gates of Heaven. According to the comedian, Abacha was summarily informed that his place was in Hell:

As he made his way to his new abode, the late victims of his terror in Nigeria followed in hot pursuit and furiously rained blows on him. Abacha started running to avoid his pursuers and eventually found a place to hide. While in hiding, he found a phone booth and quickly called Nigeria to ask from one of his assistants how Nigeria was faring under his successor, 'Salami' [chatty abbreviation of Abdulsalam]. When he was told that everywhere was peaceful, and that there had been no arrests of political opponents, no assassinations, etcetera, he exclaimed, 'Kai [exclamation common to northerners], Salami don spoil Nigeria!' [Abdulsalam has messed up Nigeria]. He also asked after prominent pro-democracy activists, only to be told that they were home, hale and hearty, in response to which he exclaimed, 'Shege [another exclamation, often denoting amazement and/or helplessness], Salami don spoil Nigeria!'<sup>3</sup>

Those who listened to this broadside invariably quivered with laughter, clearly enjoying Adeboye's caricaturing of Abacha's tyrannical era. It was not just a telling critique/reminder of Abacha's tyranny; it was also, among other things, a discourse, a 'communication', as well as a celebration of the relief that was felt by Nigerians in the light of the sudden, if totally gratifying, collapse of Abacha's homicidal authoritarianism. In portraying the new helmsman as a benign dictator (though a dictator nonetheless),

3. See Gbenga Adeboye, *Extravaganza*, Volume 1 (audio CD, Queen Omolara Label, 2000).

Adeboye's joke was also a subtle method of preparing the listening Nigerian public for the 'coming tyranny'.

Most accounts of the grim existential reality in African countries conclude by noting that, even amid the all-pervading gloom, the African's zest for life remains palpable. This seemingly unquenchable gaiety is noted, for instance, in people's capacity for humour and laughter. A 2003 *New Scientist* survey of over 65 countries adjudged Nigerians to be the happiest people in the world.<sup>4</sup> How is this seeming paradox, of vivacity amid anomie, to be explained, and of what sociological import, if any, is it? Why does laughter constantly reverberate in spaces and places where everyone (including those laughing) agrees there is little or nothing to laugh about? Mbembe and Roitman's theory,<sup>5</sup> propounded in the context of their analysis of contemporary Cameroon, is that 'laughter is inseparable from the fear inspired by the immediate present', one characterized by profound uncertainty.

For them, the Cameroonian's capacity for laughter amid the daily grind is unintelligible outside a wider discourse of the oppressive reality of post-colonial governmentality. They deserve to be quoted at length:

To the extent that in a time of crisis relations of domination conceal themselves behind figures of monstrosity, the absurd, and suffering, to *laugh* means not only to hypostatize domination but also to mark the disjunction between objectified violence and the fear that one endeavors to admit and avert. But as a magical imaginary and particular figure of superstition, laughter, derision, and mockery themselves harbour enormous possibilities for substitution, imitation, and falsification.

Accordingly,

They aim to travesty, avenge, scare the evil spirits and appease them or to exercise reprisals on 'the signs of the thing' that cannot be overcome otherwise. As rites of expiation, laughter and derision give way to an imaginary well-being; they allow for distance between the subject who laughs and the object of mockery. The division thus realized is precisely what permits the laughing subject to regain possession of self and to wear the mask, that is, to become a stranger to this 'thing' that exercises domination – and then to deride torture, murder, and all other forms of wretchedness.<sup>6</sup>

From the above, we might extrapolate that laughter serves a variety of functions for the oppressed African subject – as 'vengeance',<sup>7</sup> 'coping mechanism', a 'means of escape', 'subversion', not to mention as a means of

4. Ironically, the top five countries listed in the survey as the happiest are also among the most economically distressed worldwide. Nigeria is closely followed by Mexico, Venezuela, El Salvador and Puerto Rico. See Michael Bond, 'The pursuit of happiness', *New Scientist* 180, 2415 (2003), pp. 40–44.

5. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, 'Figures of the subject in times of crisis' in Patricia Yaeger (ed.), *The Geography of Identity* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1999), pp. 153–86.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

7. The joke about Abacha's travails in hell, for example, is fundamentally an underlying wish about where many Nigerians silently hope that particular leader (and most politicians) would wind up.

'resistance'. If that is the case, why is the literature on laughter in Africa marked by its distinctive rarity?<sup>8</sup> One hypothesis is that in the altogether understandable desire to map Africa's landscape of pain, African sociologists and Africanists have focused on what might be regarded as the stuff of 'hard' politics, leading to what Zijderfeld refers to as 'a social problems oriented sociology'.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, humour remains relatively under-investigated and is still far from seriously regarded, even though it appears to be one of the most important means by which the majority define, 'get even with', and 'resist' the power elite and the dominant power relations. Humour is also vital to the way in which ordinary people endure social asperities, as well as negotiate, shape, and contest the public domain of critical deliberation.<sup>10</sup> In short, humour is (or more appropriately ought to be regarded as) an important weapon in the armoury of civil society against perceived state high-handedness. Yet it remains largely absent from the voluminous literature on civil society, and part of my aim here is to show how, by incorporating humour within the ambit of civil society, we not only extend the conceptual boundaries of the idea, but also enrich our understanding of the (often inert) culture of protest in many African societies.

I am not suggesting that a study of humour and civil society is possible only in African societies, or, more pointedly, that there are no existing studies of the social utility of humour in other socio-political contexts. Instead, the point is that while such studies abound in non-African contexts,<sup>11</sup> they are, importantly, not part of the recent scholarly outpouring on the subject of civil society. Part of the explanation, as I discuss in a subsequent section, is that current thinking on civil society is, broadly speaking, organization-centred, meaning that, when most academics and commentators analyze civil society, there is an unspoken presumption that it concerns the activities of groups and/or associations occupying that famous 'space' between the state and the private economy. While this view is not without its merit,

8. Notable exceptions are: Charles Gesheker and Said Ahmed Warsama, 'An introduction to humour and jokes in Somali culture' in B. W. Andrzejewski, R. J. Hayward, and I. M. Lewis (eds), *Voice and Power: The culture of language in north-east Africa* (1996), pp. 141–53; Wilhelm Verwoerd and Melanie Verwoerd, 'On the injustice of (un)just joking', *Agenda* 23 (1994), pp. 67–78; and Benjamin W. Smith and Johan A. van Schalkwyk, 'The white camel of the Makgabeng', *Journal of African History* 43, 2 (2002), pp. 235–54.

9. Anton C. Zijderfeld, 'Humor, laughter and sociological theory', *Sociological Forum* 10, 2 (1995), p. 342.

10. Jeffrey Goldfarb, *Civility and Subversion: The intellectual in democratic society* (Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, 1998).

11. See in this regard Michael Mulkay, *On Humour: Its nature and its place in modern society* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988); Karen O'Quin and Joel Aronoff, 'Humour as a technique of social influence', *Social Psychological Quarterly* 44, 4 (1981), pp. 349–57; Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously* (Routledge, London, 1993); Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (Routledge, London, 2002); and Chris Powell and George E. C. Paton (eds), *Humour in Society: Resistance and control* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998).

the problem is that it does not allow us to imagine a civil society that is not necessarily ‘organized’, and therefore not necessarily contingent on the existence of a coterie of associations, civil or otherwise.

Second, most theoretical explorations of civil society have tended to take the word ‘civil’ rather literally, and as a result the emphasis, in general, has been on civil society ‘behaving well’ – promoting democracy, civil rights, and good governance – as opposed to ‘behaving badly’ – setting fire to mosques and churches, murdering political opponents, and championing genocide. Humour seems to nestle between these polarities. Finally, it would seem as if a subject like humour has received short shrift in the civil society canon because, as a good number of the chapters in the volume edited by Powell and Paton<sup>12</sup> clearly demonstrate, humour is not just about resistance, however defined; it is also about control, that is, it is usable by elements within both civil society *and* the state. Humour is thus resistant to being articulated as a virtue that is exclusive to civil society.

Humour’s capacity to ruffle the social matter and rupture hegemonic narratives has been clearly evident in recent incidents. I will cite just one example. In 2002, a full diplomatic row was barely averted between Nigeria and South Africa after the then Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, took exception to an ‘expensive’ joke about his person (his extended paunch, in case you are wondering) by two South African radio journalists. Although the journalists were later reprimanded for their less than complimentary remarks about the person of a visiting head of state, the powerful symbolism of humour as a social technique with which to ‘get under the skin’ of people in power had been inadvertently underscored. The point is that whether ‘expensive’ or ‘cheap’, jokes have always been iconic tools in the hands of society’s subalterns, used to caricature those in power, subvert authority, and, in some instances, empower themselves.

The current inquiry is therefore justified in a number of important ways. First, jokes, obviously, are serious things; they constitute a powerful metaphor for understanding the distribution of power and the nature and dynamics of social relationships within any given configuration. Second, historically, comical allegories, found these days in political cartoons,<sup>13</sup> have functioned as a means of rallying those at the margins of power, and are therefore worthy of investigation as a critical part of the politics of subordinate groups. Third, as post-military ‘democracy’ across Africa encrusts the same shenanigans that were characteristic of military rule, ridicule has emerged as a means through which people attempt to deconstruct and construct meaning out of a reality that is decidedly surreal.

12. Powell and Paton, *Humour and Society*.

13. Tejumola Olaniyan, ‘Cartooning Nigerian anticolonial nationalism’ in Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (eds), *Images and Empires: Visuality in colonial and postcolonial Africa* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA: 2002), pp. 124–40.

The rest of this article is divided into four sections. In the section that follows, I look at the general sociological literature on humour and its place in political culture and society. The aim is not to undertake a comprehensive survey of the literature. Instead, I underscore the fact that, while clearly a potent weapon in the subaltern's arsenal, jokes are by their very nature ambivalent – indeed, the conviviality expounded by Mbembe and Roitman is a function of this understanding of ambivalence. Jokes can be both social and anti-social, contestive and repressive.<sup>14</sup> In short, radicalism has no monopoly on 'rebellious humour'.

This is followed by an examination of the place of jokes in the civil society discourse. While highlighting a vacuum in this particular literature, I suggest how thinking about humour and incorporating it can expand the boundaries of civil society analysis.

I then turn the searchlight on Nigeria. With the aid of examples, I show how 'ordinary' people 'participate' through humour, and how jokes function as a double mechanism – not only to critique the state, but also to cope with the rigours of everyday life.

The article concludes with some reflections on humour and subaltern resistance. This is especially pertinent in the context of the suggestion that there is no such thing as out-and-out resistance, and that the resistance/passivity binary itself is fundamentally false. For Mbembe,

the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration, but is rather best characterized as a promiscuous relationship: a convivial tension between the *commandement* and its 'targets'. It is precisely this logic of familiarity and domesticity that explains the fact that acts of the dominated do not necessarily lead to resistance, accommodation, 'disengagement', the refusal to be captured, or to an antagonism between public facts and gestures and those of the underground. Instead, it has resulted in the mutual 'zombification' of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate.<sup>15</sup>

While this may be true, it seems to me that it does not (cannot) completely rule out what Watts<sup>16</sup> captures as common people's penchant for 'linguistic resistance' and 'symbolic discontent', or their capacity for social inversion in the context of new discursive mediations. Contestive humour, it seems, will always have a place, even in 'mutually zombified' formations.

14. Janet Holmes, *Women, Men, and Politeness* (Longman, London, 1995).

15. Achille Mbembe, 'The banality of power and the aesthetics of vulgarity in the postcolony', *Public Culture* 4, 2 (1992), p. 2.

16. Michael Watts, 'Languages of everyday practice and resistance: Stockholm at the end of the nineteenth century' in Allan Pred and Michael John Watts (eds), *Reworking Modernity: Capitalisms and symbolic discontent* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1992) p. 119.

*The sociology of humour: between escape and engagement*

In recent times, two separate global incidents have underscored the power of humour – its potency as a social technique and its capacity to disrupt a social order. First, early in 2006, cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* upset the Muslim community in both Denmark and abroad, and led to protests far and wide in which lives were lost and property destroyed.<sup>17</sup> The cartoons, their daring irreverence aside, apparently violated the Islamic tradition which forbids any depiction of the image of the Prophet. In a second instance, *Borat: Cultural learnings of America for make benefit glorious nation of Kazakhstan*, Sacha Baron Cohen's outrageously comical portrayal of life in the Central Asian country of Kazakhstan, so wound up the authorities that the government of Nursultan Nazarbayev was forced to launch a public relations blitz intended to educate the global public about 'the real Kazakhstan'. In both cases, we see respectively how humour (or at least an attempt at humour) can unsettle ideological, religious and national authorities and meta-narratives.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in both cases, through the articulation of what might be described, *pace* Lemarchand,<sup>19</sup> as 'counter-symbolic systems of authority', new tactical spaces for launching an assault on particular moral orders were opened. Thus, amid the ensuing contestation over the propriety and intellectual worth of the cartoons, and the literary and artistic merits of the movie, an unwitting debate broke out on the strictures of the Islamic religion and the apparently 'closed' nature of the Kazakh state.<sup>20</sup>

But what does this tell us about the nature, sociological status, and utility of humour? And how might this inform the concern in this essay with the potentiality of humour as a tool of resistance? The cleavage in the relevant literature is as old as it is profound, and is obviously nowhere near being reconciled. Thus while, on the one hand, Bergson<sup>21</sup> and Freud,<sup>22</sup> for instance, contend that humour is a way of evading the demands of the social

17. Remarkably, although protests took place in different parts of the world, it was only in Nigeria that they resulted in loss of lives and destruction of property.

18. To these we might add the quite devastating effects on Republican John McCain's candidacy of Jon Stewart's *Daily Show*, Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Report*, and *Saturday Night Live*'s ruthless caricaturing of McCain's vice-presidential running-mate, Alaska governor Sarah Palin.

19. Rene Lemarchand, 'Uncivil states and civil societies: how illusion became reality', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 30, 2 (1992), pp. 153–86.

20. Even though I do not privilege them here, there are other possible ways of 'reading' these two examples, for instance as 'power tools' – the Danish cartoons episode reflecting the power of Western discourse about Islam, and *Borat* the power of American commercial culture.

21. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic* (Kessinger Publishing Company, Whitefish, MT, 2004).

22. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, translated and edited by James Strachey (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960).

world, on the other hand Fine<sup>23</sup> insists on what he calls humour's capacity to 'sustain the morale and cohesion of groups'.

Part of the explanation for this divide, and for the seeming irreconcilability of the two positions, is that there are as many definitions of humour as there are scholars. Second, if Fine is right that humour, like all interpersonal behaviour, is socially situated and thus embedded in a particular social environment, it is to be expected that it will vary in impact depending on the contours of that environment. Furthermore, there are different categories of humour, which means that while some jokes may, *à la* Bergson and Freud, actually provide a means of evading the rigours of the social world, others may be useful as fibre in sustaining group morale. To take one example, Billig insists that what he calls 'rebellious humour' conveys an image of momentary freedom, or what Berger describes as 'a moment of transcendence'.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, the dilemma lingers: beyond the moment of transcendence, is humour a mere sanctuary? Mbembe's argument, informed by his view of the post-colonial relationship as essentially promiscuous, is that 'though it may demystify the *commandement* or even erode its supposed legitimacy', humour or ridicule 'does not do violence to the *commandement's* material base. At best, it creates pockets of indiscipline on which the *commandement* may stub its toe, though otherwise it glides unperturbed over them.'<sup>25</sup> While Mbembe is right in his assertion that ultimately, humour does not do violence to the *commandement's* material base (and I want to set aside for a moment the question of whether that is actually the subaltern's intention) it seems plausible that humour actually does perturb the *commandement*; otherwise, why, for instance, would the President of Kazakhstan fret over his and the country's portrayal in the *Borat* movie and inaugurate an anti-*Borat*?

Also, while it may be true that ridicule may achieve no more than 'pockets of indiscipline', that may well be the point – to proliferate those seemingly innocuous oases of indiscipline with a view to evading the clutches of the *commandement's* discipline, and achieving long-term erosion of its legitimacy. It is resistance, of the Scottian<sup>26</sup> genre of small-scale, everyday acts, quite all right, but not the type privileged in most academic analyses. Finally, to insist, as Mbembe does, that humour is ultimately ineffectual for radical change is to forget that subaltern humour is sometimes its own end. The very

23. G. A. Fine, 'Humorous interaction and the social construction of meaning: making sense in a jocular vein' in N. K. Denzin (ed.), *Studies in Symbolic Interaction: A Research Journal* 5, 5 (1984), pp. 83–101.

24. Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels. Modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural* (Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1969); Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour* (Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, 2005).

25. Achille Mbembe, 'The banality of power', p. 2.

26. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden transcripts* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1990).



process of ‘letting off steam’ is deeply symbolic and counter-discursive,<sup>27</sup> and in indentifying and causing power to face up to its own grossness, the subaltern attains an incomputable but nevertheless tangible moral victory.

It is in this context that we need to understand jokes and consistent public ridicule in Nigeria of the state and its agents, be they powerful individuals and institutions of ‘power’, government parastatals, or even something as intangible as what is popularly called the ‘Nigerian character’. The following examples will suffice.<sup>28</sup> The first is the capacity for linguistic inversion, seen in the description of the famously unreliable national power supply company, the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA), as Never Expect Power Always, or Never Expect Power At all. When NEPA transmuted to NEP Plc (though with no discernible change in its established incapacity to supply power), civic opprobrium was quick: Never Expect Power, Please Light your Candle. These days, and arguably with one eye on the public’s justifiable derision at its service, the official name has been changed to Power Holding Company of Nigeria, which an unconvinced public has re-named Power Hoarding Company of Nigeria, or more commonly Problem Has Changed Name, a clear reference to the company’s continuing failure to provide regular electricity.<sup>29</sup> We see here an example of how public ridicule of a failing official institution can encapsulate both the public’s feeling and the institution’s own inadequacies.

The other two examples are much more encompassing in that what is impugned is not just one sagging public institution, but the totality of state and society, or what is commonly called the *state of things*. The first centres on an imaginary conversation between a journalist and a contestant for public office in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy in the United States:

*Journalist:* What will happen if Nigeria is attacked?

*Contestant:* What will happen if Nigeria is attacked? Well... if that happens, there can be no comparison. That is because in Nigeria we are much better prepared for these kinds of attacks.

- We do not construct exaggerated elevated buildings.
- We all get on the job late in the morning; therefore, at 8.45 am there won’t be sufficient people to kill.

27. David Parkin, ‘The creativity of abuse’, *Man* (New Series) 15, 1 (1980), pp. 45–64.

28. These and subsequent examples were either encountered in participant observation during my fieldwork in Nigeria, or culled from the Internet. In all cases, what is demonstrated is the ubiquity of jokes in quotidian existence, whether at the grassroots or the ‘netroots’.

29. For more on electricity consumers’ response to the corporation’s inefficiency, see Ayodeji Olukoju, “‘Never Expect Power Always’: electricity consumers’ response to monopoly, corruption and inefficient services in Nigeria”, *African Affairs* 103, 410 (2004), pp. 51–72.

- Fire fighters and police officers will do their utmost not to get to the spot in time. They will reach there just when everything is over, so there will be no casualties among them.
- Nigeria Airways would surely have fouled up the terrorists' plans by being delayed again, and of course losing the luggage containing the bombs.
- A Nigerian would not have used his cell phone to call home. He would've hit the terrorist over the head with it.
- If a terrorist was living in Nigeria, he would have been robbed and molested so many times he would have given up and gone back home a long time ago.
- In Nigeria, the terrorists would not have obtained the flight manual, because there is none.
- In Nigeria *egbe* [juju – sorcery] would have made all the passengers disappear before hitting the target.
- You see ... in Nigeria, we are well prepared!<sup>30</sup>

### In the second example:

A man dies and goes to hell. There he finds that there is a different hell for each country. He goes first to the German hell and asks 'What do they do here?' He is told, 'First they put you in an electric chair for an hour. Then they lay you on a bed of nails for another hour. Then the German devil comes in and whips you for the rest of the day.' The man does not like the sound of that at all, so he moves on. He checks out the USA hell, as well as the Russian hell and many more. He discovers that they are more or less the same as the German. Then he comes to the Nigerian hell and finds that there is a very long line of people waiting to get in. Amazed, he asks, 'What do they do here?' He is told, 'First they put you in an electric chair for an hour. Then they lay you on a bed of nails for another hour. Then the Nigerian devil comes in and whips you for the rest of the day.' 'But that is exactly the same as all other hells – why are there so many people waiting to get in?' 'Because there is never any electricity, so the electric chair does not work; someone stole all the nails; and the devil used to be a public servant, so he comes in, punches his timecard, and then goes back home. . . .

As noted earlier, the target of ridicule in these examples is not just the Nigerian state – it is also the Nigerian society, and, although certain derelict public parastatals are mentioned (the now defunct Nigeria Airways, the Fire Brigade), what is being lampooned is the sheer absurdity of life as currently lived in the country. Therefore, as a social technology aimed at critiquing 'the system', humour is not just directed at the state. Instead, jokes are often targeted at official vulgarity, and are also a means through which the 'powerless' hold a mirror to themselves; hence the allusions in the above jokes to Nigerians' penchant for not being punctual at work, official larceny of public goods, unfaithful public servants, and the general feeling of disorder and violence which pervades the streets.

30. Several variants of this particular joke exist in other countries. For an analysis of similar jokes in the Hungarian context, see Lajos Csaszai, 'World Trade Center jokes and their Hungarian reception', *Journal of Folklore Research* 40, 2 (2003), pp. 175–210.

Furthermore, jokes such as the above are a means through which ‘citizens’ of a particular country engage in what might be called basic comparative sociology. It is quite evident from the latter two jokes that when Nigerians express their disaffection with the quality of life and general state of affairs in the country, this is done with the (presumably) better situation in other countries in mind; and in what might be a sub-conscious allusion to the terrible living conditions in the country, many of the jokes about life in Nigeria involve a reference to hell. One of the more popular hell-related jokes has Her Majesty the Queen of the United Kingdom, former President George Bush of the United States, and former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo dying and finding themselves in (naturally) hell. On arrival, the three leaders ask to make calls home to find out how their subjects are doing. While the Queen and President Bush pay £25,000 and US\$50,000 respectively to make a five-minute call, Obasanjo is told to speak for as long as he wants, since his own call is toll free. When the other two leaders protest, they are told that Obasanjo’s call is a local call, that is, from one part of hell to another.

The possibilities of humour are therefore quite diverse. It can be used both to articulate the discontinuities in the social system, and to create a sort of ‘profane’ public sphere.<sup>31</sup> This is especially important in formations where authoritarianism, military or civilian, may have closed off conventional avenues for sociability. In such contexts, humour can be important in exercising agency even as it is being denied, attaining a form of political participation amid alienation, and, crucially, challenging, contesting, negating, and ‘playing with’<sup>32</sup> official meaning. Given that concepts and terms such as the public sphere, open versus closed societies, forms of sociability, and agency are core to the sociological endeavour, it is all the more puzzling that, until recently, sociological interest in jokes (particularly when compared to sister disciplines in the social sciences like anthropology and philosophy) has been exiguous indeed.<sup>33</sup>

Against this background, one aim of this essay is to further the project of a ‘comic conception of society’<sup>34</sup> by suturing it to the relatively more recent discourse of civil society. The next section is devoted to an explanation of why, I contend, this is important.

31. Jibrin Ibrahim, ‘The state and religion in Nigeria: force and dynamics’, *Afrika Zamani* 5 (1997) and 6 (1998), pp. 39–66.

32. Anton C. Zijderveld, ‘Trend report: the sociology of humour and laughter’, *Current Sociology* 31, 3 (1983), pp. 1–103.

33. See in this regard Powell and Paton, *Humour and Society*; Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*; and Critchley, *On Humour*. See also Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (eds), *A Cultural History of Humour from Antiquity to the Present Day* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997); and Louiza Odysseos, ‘Laughing matters: peace, democracy and the challenge of the comic narrative’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, 3 (2001), pp. 709–32.

34. Murray S. Davis, *What’s So Funny? The comic conception of culture and society* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1993).

*The rudeness of civil society*

If humour can be an important instrument of engagement, why has it not enjoyed more prominence in the civil society discourse? There are many plausible answers, among them the fact that the literature has been dominated by questions on the theoretical pedigree of the idea,<sup>35</sup> state–civil society dialectics,<sup>36</sup> the role of civil society in democratization,<sup>37</sup> and civil society and the public–private divide,<sup>38</sup> among others. What this vast and often conflictive literature has in common is a preoccupation with what might be regarded as the positive attributes of civil society – to rein in an overbearing state, check the excesses of authoritarian rulers, and (especially in Africa) bring the incivilities of morally compromised regimes to account. This mode of thinking about civil society is in itself reflective of at least two dominant mentalities. One is the founding prejudice that puts organizations of a civic disposition at the centre of the idea of civil society. According to this understanding, associations are not just key – in fact, ‘the civility that makes democratic politics possible can only be learned in the associational networks’.<sup>39</sup> There is clearly no room in this conceptualization for social action that may not be ‘organized’, or that happens outside organizations.

A second bias is a corollary of the first, and concerns the emphasis on civility. Within this mode, organizations are not just *de rigueur*, they are defined (and produced) by a narrowly conceived (and obviously static) ‘civility’. Again, in this imagination, there is no allowance for ‘incivility’, ‘bad behaviour’, or ‘rudeness’; civil society is reduced to ‘manners’, ‘distinction’, even ‘class’. As we shall see presently, this arbitrary attribution of civility to civil society is of historical vintage, and as Keane has observed,<sup>40</sup> it is itself propelled by a particular teleology, one that assumes the truth and inevitability of human ‘progress’ from ‘rudeness’ to ‘refinement’. Because it has implications for the object of this essay, it is important to reflect on this problem.

35. Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997); John A. Hall (ed.), *Civil Society: Theory, history, comparison* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995).

36. John W. Harbeson, Donald Rothchild, and Naomi Chazan (eds), *Civil Society and the State in Africa* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 1994); Eghosa Osaghae (ed.), *Between the State and Civil Society in Africa: Perspectives on development* (CODESRIA, Dakar, 1994).

37. Lloyd Sachikonye (ed.), *Democracy, Civil Society and the State: Social movements in Southern Africa* (SAPES Books, Harare, 1995); Carolyn M. Elliott (ed.), *Civil Society and Democracy: A reader* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003); Robert Fine and Shirin Rai (eds), *Civil Society: Democratic perspectives* (Frank Cass, London, 1997).

38. Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld (eds), *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and perceptions* (Sage, London, 2005); Gurpreet Mahajan in collaboration with Helmut Reifeld, *The Public and the Private* (Sage, London, 2003).

39. Farhad Kazemi, ‘Perspectives on Islam and civil society’ in Nancy Rosenblum and Robert C. Post (eds), *Civil Society and Government* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2002), pp. 317–33.

40. John Keane, *Civil Society: Old images, new visions* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998).

It would seem paradoxical that the ghost of uncivility, to paraphrase Keane again, would haunt civil society, for the whole point of the historical quest for a 'civil' society has been the desire to be rid of this unwanted twin. When, for instance, the contract theorists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries collectively turned their back on the natural (read uncivil) artifice of the state of nature, it was with the hope of permanently securing the 'other', the state and civil society.<sup>41</sup> In the same vein, the contemporary haste to abandon the dysfunctional modern African state seems to have led to a blind(ing) race for a civil society that is monochromatically envisioned as the embodiment of virtue. Yet, because the construct upon which it rests is essentially tenuous, this perspective fails to capture the essential moral ambiguity and complexity of civil society.

Just as the teleology of a perfect progression from barbarism to civility is essentially fictive, so, arguably, is the ideology of a civil society shorn of rudeness.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the growing academic interest in the 'uncivil dimension of civil society'<sup>43</sup> as part of a wider intellectual project of formulating 'alternative conceptions'<sup>44</sup> of civil society. Central to this expansion of the definitional boundaries of the idea is the incorporation of people (for example the sort that Markovitz and Roos describe respectively as 'riff raff' and 'outcast'), action, and manners that are 'barbarous', 'inappropriate', 'rude', 'impolite', or, in short, 'uncivil'.<sup>45</sup>

Jokes, particularly jokes by the sub-class, I want to suggest, fit into this framework, even though, as earlier clarified, I am by no means implying that humour is a preserve of the 'excluded'. Bringing jokes (and other forms of 'inert action') into the ambit of civil society discourse can revitalize a discourse that has often resembled, especially in Africa, a sterile referendum on the successes and shenanigans of pro-democracy NGOs. This is not to say that there have been no studies of the process through which civil society has

41. Maxine Reitzes, 'Civil society, the public sphere and the state: reflections on classical and contemporary discourses', *Theoria: A Journal of Studies in the Arts, Humanities and the Social Sciences* 7, 83–84 (October 1994), pp. 94–121.

42. In Keane's pithy statement, 'there are times and places when civilized manners can and do peacefully cohabit with mass murder'; Keane, *Civil Society*, p. 128.

43. Richard Boyd, *Uncivil Society: The perils of pluralism and the making of modern liberalism* (Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2004); Leigh A. Payne, *Uncivil Movements: The armed right wing and democracy in Latin America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 2000); Julia Roos, 'Prostitutes, civil society, and the state in Weimar Germany' in Frank Trentmann (ed.), *Paradoxes of Civil Society: New perspectives on modern German and British history* (Berghahn Books, New York, NY, 2003), pp. 263–80; Mary Kaldor and Diego Muro-Ruiz, 'Religious and nationalist militant groups: the dark side of global civil society?' in *Global Civil Society Yearbook 2003* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), pp. 151–84.

44. Simone Chambers and Will Kymlicka (eds), *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2002).

45. Julia Roos, 'Prostitutes, civil society'; Irving L. Markovitz, 'Uncivil society, pluralism, Goldilocks, and other fairy tales in Africa' in George Clement Bond and Nigel C. Gibson (eds), *Contested Terrains and Constructed Categories: Contemporary Africa in focus* (Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 2002), pp. 117–44.

sought to subvert, deconstruct, and engage with political authority across the continent, especially over the past two decades.<sup>46</sup> My argument is that a focus on the practices and possibilities of humour will attach the study of civil society to zones of existence that are frequently unorganized – zones littered with what Scott describes as ‘hidden transcripts’ and ‘murmurs’, a sphere of ‘infrapolitics’ that constitutes the invisible space of possible resistance to domination and capture.<sup>47</sup>

### *Deriding sovereigns – and selves*

Humour has always been an important part of the socio-political calculus in Nigeria. Being humorous and having the capacity to joke or take a joke have been part of the unwritten ‘body language’ of power. Humour is therefore an intangible currency of exchange in the socio-political economy, affecting and shaping popular perceptions of the ‘humanity’ of political leaders, who may or may not earn a place in popular affection depending on whether or not they are seen to possess a sense of humour, and therefore are ‘nice’ people who have a feeling for the ‘common man’. In the popular mind, a smiling leader with a capacity for jokes is sometimes regarded (often erroneously) as a caring one, while a stern-looking leader is perceived as (and expected to be) ‘harsh’.

In this section, I provide some examples of jokes that Nigerians use as a ‘double-assault’, that is, both to ridicule the state, and themselves.<sup>48</sup> Here, humour is as much a form of collective self-critique as it is a form of political resistance, and the following illustrations from Nigeria’s recent political history will suffice. In a first example, it is arguable that much of the negative social capital that the Buhari/Idiagbon regime in Nigeria (1983–5) accumulated was traceable in large part to the dour mien which the first two citizens studiously wore until their overthrow in August 1985. Such was their notoriety for being unsmiling (though many still remember them favourably for their War Against Indiscipline, WAI), equated with lacking a sense of humour, that when, in a rare moment, the then Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters, General Tunde Idiagbon, was caught with his

46. See, for example, Robert Fatton, Jr, ‘Africa in the age of democratization: the civic limitations of civil society’, *African Studies Review* 38, 2 (September 1995), pp. 67–99; Celestin Monga, *The Anthropology of Anger: Civil society and democracy in Africa* (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 1996); Eghosa Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since independence* (Hurst and Company, London, 1998); Jean and John Comaroff (eds), *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical perspectives* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1999).

47. James C. Scott, *Domination*.

48. Space does not allow for a detailed discussion of patron–clientism here (see Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday deception and popular discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2006) but suffice to note the important paradox that when Nigerians use humour to criticize the elite and social inequality, they simultaneously often allude to their own culpability in reproducing the very structures that oppress them.

guard momentarily down, newspapers were flooded with the unlikely image. By contrast, the man who overthrew the duo, General Ibrahim Babangida, could be said to have smiled his way into the hearts of Nigerians. Until Nigerians discovered that he had a diabolical side, the General was at one point the most popular leader in Nigerian history, affectionately dubbed 'the gap-toothed general' by a fawning media.

Thus, it is possible for a politician with that vital 'other side' (the capacity for jokes) to earn legitimacy through the back door, thus validating my earlier point about the 'radical' and 'conservative' potentialities of humour. In this latter regard, one must note how Olusegun Obasanjo's folksy and 'flesh pressing' style (an irony, given his own noted incapacity to take the joke made by the South African journalists) contributed to his initial popular acceptance.<sup>49</sup> Humour in this sense works simultaneously as critique cum caricature, and as a survival strategy, purely in the sense of letting off steam amid what Jean and John Comaroff call the 'excessive disorderliness' that impregnates quotidian life in the post-colony.<sup>50</sup> Before examining this, however, it is important to note briefly the specific political context in which the resort to humour takes place in Nigeria.

The central motif of public life in Nigeria for most of political independence has been of a certain disappointment and disillusionment with the conduct of politics and governance, whether by military or civilian rulers. Popular frustration and cynicism about 'the system' is captured in the common lamentation that, in Nigeria, 'nothing works', that the country is a 'crippled giant',<sup>51</sup> or that there is a quasi-mystical element called 'the Nigerian character' that exists to frustrate every effort, no matter how well-meaning, to reform politics in the country. This deep-seated cynicism is often punctuated, however, by near-breakthrough moments when the whole of the political culture seems, momentarily, on the verge of a radical transformation, only for the *status quo ante* to prevail. One such quasi-redemptive moment was the presidential election of 12 June 1993 which, contrary to all expectations, went ahead to become what many still believe remains the freest and fairest election in Nigerian history. However, the euphoria which greeted the election was not to last. On 26 June 1993, military President Babangida confirmed the annulment of the election,<sup>52</sup> claiming that the result had produced what he called an outcome which the nation 'did not bargain for'. He also claimed that abrogating the election was necessary in

49. See Josephine Lohor, 'The other side of Baba', *ThisDay* (Lagos), 14 May 2004. See also Abraham Ogbodo, 'Obasanjo's wit saves the day in Port Harcourt', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 25 April 2004.

50. Jean and John Comaroff (eds), *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2006).

51. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant*.

52. The annulment was first made public on 23 June through an unsigned document.

order to 'rescue the judiciary from internal wrangling and to protect our legal system from being ridiculed and politicised'.<sup>53</sup>

The cancellation of the election threw the country into a tailspin and deepened social anger against the military. It pitted what little was left of the media and human rights NGOs (the fulcrum of an emergent civil society) against the military. Furthermore, it revived traditional media of protest like theatre, oratory, and folk music,<sup>54</sup> as well as irregular, though not completely unknown, forms of protest like underground (guerrilla) journalism. In fact, as Olukotun<sup>55</sup> has observed, if anything was common to all these forms, particularly the traditional media of protest, it was the willingness to use humour, ridicule, and, in more than a few cases, outright abuse. Overall, the annulment – which was everything but a joke – made the military state fair game in a whole new formation in which barefaced deception by the state had intensified public cynicism.

This is the socio-historical context in which the resort to a combination of jokes and official mockery may be understood. The examples that follow variously speak to the perceived venality of the Nigerian state and its agents, the overwhelmingly Machiavellian approach to politics, the lugubrious living conditions, the state of the economy, the crass materialism in the society at large, and often a combination of all this.

### *Joke 1*

A little boy goes to his father and asks, 'What is Nigerian politics?' Dad says, 'Well, son, let me try to explain it this way:

- A. I am the head of the family, so call me the President.
- B. Your mother is the administrator of the family money, so we call her the Government.
- C. We are here to take care of your needs, so we'll call you the Nigerian People.
- D. The nanny, let us regard as the Working Class.
- E. And your baby brother, we'll call him the Future. Now think about that and see if it makes any sense.'

So the little boy goes off to bed thinking about what Dad has said. Later that night, he hears his baby brother crying, so he gets up to check on him. He finds that the baby has severely soiled his diaper, so he goes to his parent's room and finds his mother sound asleep. Not wanting to wake her up, he goes to the nanny's room, and finding the door

53. Abiodun Onadipe, 'Nigeria's troubled years', *Contemporary Review* 267, 1558 (November 1995), pp. 230–7.

54. Ayo Olukotun, 'Traditional protest media and anti-military struggle in Nigeria 1988–1999' *African Affairs* 101, 403 (2002), pp. 193–211; Karin Barber, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba popular life in theatre* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2001).

55. Olukotun, 'Traditional protest media'.



locked, he peeks through the keyhole and sees his father in bed with the nanny. He gives up and goes back to bed. The next morning, the little boy says to his father, 'Dad, I think I understand the concept of Nigerian politics now.' The father says, 'Good, son, tell me in your own words what you think Nigerian politics is all about.' The boy replies, 'The President is screwing the Working Class, while the Government is sound asleep. The People are being ignored and the Future is in deep shit.'

### *Joke 2*

A man was driving home in Lagos at about 2 a.m. and got to a police checkpoint. A policeman stopped him and asked for all his documents (particulars, insurance, licence, etc), which the man duly presented. The policeman then asked for even more documents – birth certificate, baptismal certificate, school diploma, etc. The man had everything at the ready. He then told the policeman, 'Any document you want, I've got it right here.' To which the policeman snapped back, 'Sharraapp! Who say you no get papers?' The policeman was clearly at the end of his wits.

In frustration, he even kicked his tires to check if they were well inflated, had adequate treads, etc. Everything was fine. When at last there was nothing else to charge the driver with, the policeman said, 'I charge you for driving alone at this time of the day, for if you come get accident now<sup>56</sup> who will go and tell your people?'

The man (obviously a 'born-again' Christian) replied, 'I'm not alone, Jesus Christ is with me here, Angel Gabriel, Angel Michael and five other angels are also with me here.' The policeman took one look and said, 'All these people inside this small car?' 'Yes,' the man answered. 'In that case,' said the policeman, 'I charge you for overloading.'

### *Joke 3*

A young man died before his appointed time, but the Gateman of Heaven took pity on him and decided to give him his life back so that he could return to Nigeria. The young man burst into tears, pleading that he would rather go to hell than go back home to Nigeria.

### *Joke 4*

A family in Nigeria was puzzled when the coffin of their dead mother arrived from the USA, sent by their sister. The tiny corpse was so tightly squeezed inside the coffin that their mother's face was practically touching the glass cover. When they opened the coffin, they found a letter from their sister pinned to their mother's chest which read:

Dearest brothers and sisters,

I am sending you our mother's remains for burial in Lagos. Sorry I couldn't come along as the expenses were so high. You will find inside the coffin, under Mama's

56. Pidgin English for, 'Were you to be involved in an accident now.'

body, 12 cans of Libby's corned beef and 12 cans of luncheon meat. Just divide them among yourselves.

On Mama's feet is a brand new pair of Reeboks (size 8) for Junior. There are 4 pairs of Reeboks under Mama's head for Tunde's sons. Mama is wearing 6 Ralph Lauren T-shirts – one is for Omo, Roy and the rest for my nephews. Mama is also wearing one dozen Wonder Bras (your favorite) – just share them among yourselves.

The 2 dozen Victoria's Secret panties that Mama is wearing should be distributed among my nieces and cousins. Mama is also wearing 8 Dockers pants – Lukman, please get one for yourself and the rest for the boys. The Swiss watch you asked for is on Mama's left wrist, please get it.

Aunty Ronke, Mama is wearing what you asked for – earrings, rings and a necklace, please take them. Also, the 6 pairs of Chanel stockings that Mama is wearing must be shared among the teenage girls there. I hope they like the colours.

Your loving sister,

Nene

P.S. Please take care of finding a nice dress for Mama for her burial. You may go to Orile or Yaba<sup>57</sup> for a cheap *okrika*. In case you need anything that I may have forgotten, please let me know as Uncle is not feeling well.

### *Joke 5*

A well-worn Five Hundred Naira note (the Nigerian currency) and a similarly distressed Five Naira note arrived at the Central Bank of Nigeria to be retired. As they moved along the conveyor belt to be burnt, they struck up a conversation. The Five Hundred Naira reminisced about its travels all over the country. 'I've had a pretty good life,' the Five Hundred Naira proclaimed.

'Why, I've been to Lagos, Ibadan, Benin, Kano and Abuja,<sup>58</sup> the finest restaurants in Victoria Island, Kaduna, Abuja and eastern Nigeria, performances at Muson Centre and Glover Hall, the hottest night clubs all over the country, and even a cruise on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.'

'Wow!' said the Five Naira. 'You've really had an exciting life!' 'So tell me,' says Five Hundred, 'where have you been throughout your lifetime?' The Five Naira replied, 'Oh, I've been to the Apostolic and Methodist Church, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Deeper Life Bible Church, Baptist Church, the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, the Celestial Church of God, the Lutheran Church...'

The Five Hundred Naira note interrupts: "What's a church?"

These samples show up various facets of life and living conditions in modern Nigeria, betraying an equal concern with state venality and societal materialism. In this sense, jokes take on an aspect of 'current history', ephemeral

57. Popular markets in metropolitan Lagos, Nigeria.

58. All major financial centres in different regions of the country. Abuja is also the administrative capital.

'documents' through which an observer can trace the patterns and obsessions of everyday life in the country. There are innumerable jokes about (the persons of) people in power,<sup>59</sup> all of which are intelligible in the context of the struggle by subordinate classes to 'produce alternative epistemes with consequences for power relations'.<sup>60</sup> That being the case, it comes as no surprise that what might be called the humour industry in Nigeria<sup>61</sup> has flourished in tandem with the cascading of the national economy and a sharp and continuing reduction in the capacity of the private sector to absorb new entrants. The circulation of these jokes has also been facilitated by the coming of mobile telephony, a phenomenon that, in its own limited way, has seen to the expansion (and secularization) of the public space.<sup>62</sup>

Much more than the medium of humour however, it is its spirit that this essay wishes to emphasize. The jokes are generally meant to encode the socio-political malaise and economic degeneration in the country,<sup>63</sup> which partly explains why many of them are rendered in pidgin, which is generally seen as the language of 'the streets', and thus of the 'powerless' and 'excluded' who 'own' them.<sup>64</sup>

59. Mbembe has documented how 'popular forms of ridiculing power, jokes of a sexual nature about the men in power, their bodily functions, appetite, and so on', constitute examples of 'how the hollowness of state power is dealt with'. See Mbembe, 'The banality of power', p. 6. See also the collection of essays in Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, *States of Imagination: Ethnographic explorations of the postcolonial state* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2001); Andrew Apter's excellent study of the socio-political and discursive contexts of ritual songs of obscenity and abuse among Yoruba women in Andrew Apter, 'Discourse and its disclosures: Yoruba women and the sanctity of abuse', *Africa* 68, 1 (1998), pp. 68–97; and Flora Veit-Wild, 'The grotesque body of the postcolony: Sony Labou Tansi and Dambudzo Marechera', *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 314 (April–June 2005), pp. 227–66. For a specific study of how the subordinate classes engage in 'anti-politics' through language, see Tim Kelsall, 'Politics, anti-politics, international justice: language and power in the Special Court for Sierra Leone', *Review of International Studies* 32, 4 (2006), pp. 587–602.

60. Olukotun, 'Traditional protest media', p. 196.

61. Recently developments in the entertainment economy have seen an explosion in the number of stand-up comics, mostly fresh university graduates who found the doors of regular employment closed in their faces. Examples are Chimamkpa Anyamkpa, Okey Bakassi, 'Basket Mouth', Ali Baba, Henry Ndubuisi, Osaghiato Okunoghae (Talk Talk), Julius Agwu (De Genius), Klint da Drunk Abagana, Emmanuel Adigwe (D'Lectura), 'Holy Mallam', Gandoki, 'I go Die', and Dammy Adekoya. For more on the consequences of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) for the entertainment industry, see Jonathan Haynes, 'Structural adjustments of Nigerian comedy: Baba Sala' (paper published under the auspices of Program of African Studies, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, No. 8, 1994), pp. 17–18, 20.

62. Ebenezer Obadare, 'Playing politics with the mobile phone in Nigeria: civil society, big business and the state', *Review of African Political Economy* 33, 107 (March 2006), pp. 93–111.

63. In this respect, there are numerous jokes about the extent to which the average Nigerian is ready to go in order to survive the harsh economic climate. In one example, a Nigerian who had fled to the US where he was eking out an existence was asked to don the robe of a gorilla to entertain visitors at a zoo. Somehow, he ended up in the lions' section, and as a red-blooded male reached for his jugular, he let out a scream in Yoruba: *E gba mi o. Mo ti ku ooo!* (Help! I am dead!), only to hear the lion reply: *Omo'ya, ma p'ariwo, ma je ki ise bo lowo awa mejeji* (Dear compatriot, please don't shout, don't let them sack both of us!)

64. Tim Kelsall, 'Politics, anti-politics'.

*Conclusion: enduring dystopia, with a smile on one's face*

In November 2002, the streets of Kaduna, a major city in northern Nigeria, and Abuja, exploded in a burst of sectarian violence. Muslim *Almajirai* (street children), protesting against the publication of an article in *ThisDay* newspaper, which they claimed insulted the person of the prophet Mohammed, vented their anger on the offices of the newspaper. In the allegedly offensive article, entitled 'Miss World 2002: the world at their feet', the author, Ms Isioma Daniel, made a light-hearted comment about the tense build-up to the global pageantry which Nigeria was slated to host. Alluding to the political and logistical obstacles being encountered by the organizers, Daniel remarked:

As the idea [of Nigeria hosting the beauty contest] became a reality, it also aroused dissent from many groups of people. The Muslims thought it was immoral to bring ninety-two women to Nigeria and ask them to revel in vanity. What would Mohammed think? In all honesty, he would probably have chosen a wife from one of them.<sup>65</sup>

Interrogated later on the reference to Prophet Mohammed, Daniel said:

The particular sentence I added in as a last minute thing actually. I thought it was funny, light-hearted and I didn't see it as anything anybody should take seriously or cause much fuss. When I'd written the piece, the whole tone turned out to be breezy and sarcastic, light-hearted, kind of tongue-in-cheek humour.<sup>66</sup>

From the fall-out of this apparently innocuous jocular allusion – between 150 and 200 people dead, at least 320 hospitalized, and property worth more than \$2.2 billion destroyed<sup>67</sup> – we can see that jokes, as they say, are serious things, and may have serious and often unexpected consequences.

A point can also be made about the ambivalence of jokes: from this particular example, we see the capacity of jokes to rile even the subordinate classes. In this perspective, jokes emerge as a neutral weapon which can be used by and against both the 'strong' and the 'weak'. In fact, holders of political power can and often do use humour to ingratiate themselves (as I have alluded to in the case of former president Olusegun Obasanjo) with the lower classes, with a view to altering their public perception and therefore creating a new kind of public image of themselves and their regime. Humour is therefore, to return to a point made earlier, not just a simple and exclusive preserve of the subordinate classes.

65. Isioma Daniel, 'Miss World 2002: the world at their feet', *ThisDay* (Lagos), 16 November 2002. <[www.thisdayonline.com](http://www.thisdayonline.com)>.

66. See Isioma Daniel's interview with the BBC, broadcast on the BBC Africa Service's programme, *Talkabout Africa*, 12 March 2003.

67. Nduka Nwosu, 'Faces of a lost pageant', *The Guardian* (Lagos), 30 November 2002. For an analysis of the entire episode, see Ebenezer Obadare, 'In search of a public sphere: the fundamentalist challenge to civil society in Nigeria', *Patterns of Prejudice* 38, 2 (2004), pp. 177–98.

Which is not to deny that laughter can be an almost natural reaction to the irrationalities of the state, manifested in the excesses and absurdities of its representatives. As Mbembe has noted, although ‘the *commandement* itself aspires to be a cosmogony, yet, owing to its very oddity, it is this “order of the world”, in its eccentricity, that popular laughter causes to capsize, often quite intentionally’.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, by laughing, the body ‘drains the official universe of meaning and sometimes obliges it to function in emptiness, or powerlessness’.<sup>69</sup> Lastly, although humour is a non-violent way of escape (and simultaneously, engagement), it may, as we have seen, have violent consequences depending on who uses it, how it is ‘received’, and in what context. Jokes are in essence ultimately meaningful only in relation to specific social referents.

Humour is therefore integral to a reality which compels the post-colonial subject to improvise endlessly, and while the question has always been about whether it is a form of resistance or passivity, this article shows that it is both and more. What humour and its many uses essentially point to is the diversity, even wildness, of social life *outside* institutions, though still *within* ‘civil society’. These are the unmapped spaces where the governor and the governed blend in a spectrum of possibilities. Humour is integral to the constitution of this space because it serves as means through which the subordinate classes, the ‘barbarous’, ‘get even’ with the sovereign, and, as Grovogui<sup>70</sup> maintains in a related context, ‘dispose of themselves’. There are of course different kinds of humour, each creating a different kind of significance, and it is the variety of social interactions and/or mediums in which jokes are presented and their performative qualities in a given social context that enhance or diminish their significance.

Yet, while humour is key, it is important to realize that it is merely an aspect of a whole dimension of ‘infrapolitics’, that ‘unobtrusive realm of political struggle’ that nonetheless ‘provides much of the cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action’ on which attention is generally focused.<sup>71</sup> This, among other reasons, is what makes it such an important subject for civil society analysis. It is the realm which produces new ‘cultural idioms’ that structure the modalities of resistance and regeneration of the civil society,<sup>72</sup> and incorporating this realm should transform how we think about civil society, the state, resistance, docility, and, of course, social action.

68. Mbembe, ‘Banality of power’, p. 6.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 392.

70. Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1996).

71. Scott, *Domination*, pp. 183–4. For a detailed discussion of the informal realm of political struggle in Africa, see in particular Chapter 2 on ‘Words’ in Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious thought and political practice in Africa* (Hurst and Company, London, 2004). For a more global perspective, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world* (Permanent Black, Delhi, 2006).

72. Lemarchand, ‘Uncivil states and civil societies’.