

Chapter 3

More Than a Joking Matter: Humor and Political Engagement in *Ogas at the Top*

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses how humor is generated in Oga at the Top series (OATT), a puppet political satire program featuring prominent actors on the Nigerian political scene. The question of how multimodal phenomena in humor bearing texts combine to create a humorous political commentary has not been addressed within the Nigerian context. This chapter therefore explores how different semiotic resources are combined to create humor in OATT. From the 25 videos selected from Season One, the humor creation mechanisms in OATT were found to include caricature of national leaders, re-interpretation of contemporary happenings, musical parody, script opposition in conversation, inter-textuality and physical violence. Though the stated function of the series was to exploit the Nigerian political climate for humor, the analysis shows that the audience has appropriated the videos for their own ends based on the functions they felt they could serve. The chapter concludes with the significance of the online distribution of the videos.

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INTRODUCTION

Humor is an interesting phenomenon that suffuses many aspects of human interaction, both in the private and public spheres. One such sphere is politics, where the use of political humor is thought to date from antiquity, in ancient Greece and Rome. As Sorensen (2014) demonstrates, research on political humor frequently approaches the subject from a historical perspective or as a certain type of genre (satire,

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More Than a Joking Matter

cartoon) presented in a certain medium (TV or the Internet). This chapter discusses humor as a form of social engagement during a period of political transition in Nigeria through an analysis of Season One of the satirical Oga at the Top series (OATT), a puppet political satire program featuring prominent actors on the Nigerian political scene.

It is an expository chapter, focusing on the language and visual content of the videos, how other texts and contexts are brought in and how viewers receive them. English is the language most frequently used by the puppet characters, although a few code-switch into Nigerian Pidgin. Expletives and interjections in some indigenous languages of Nigeria, namely Hausa, Yoruba and Ijaw. The series is produced by Buni Media, a Kenyan company and distributed on Buni Media's video-on-demand platform Buni TV, and are also available on SaharaReporters.com, YouTube, Afrinolly, and MTN Play.

Humor commodities such as cartoons and jokes are regularly created and disseminated in Nigeria, with the political space and players therein sometimes being the focus of these jokes. There are professional comedians; comedy shows are a staple fare of festive seasons; and television programming includes comedy shows in English and indigenous languages. However, not much attention has been given to why the commodities are deemed to be funny or what makes a particular 'joke' or other humor commodity funny. A corollary of this is the question of how the various elements in a supposedly humorous text combine to create humor. Specifically, the question of how the various elements of spectacle, speech and music in the Oga at the Top puppet TV series combine to create a humorous political commentary has not been addressed. To the best of my knowledge, there is no previous research on the political satirical humor featuring puppet characters in the Nigerian political environment

The objectives of the study reported in this chapter are as follows:

- To identify and describe the various types of humor used in OATT;
- To identify and describe the humor creation strategies in OATT;
- To analyze the mechanisms employed within the identified strategies;
- To determine the significance of the online transmission of the videos; and
- To describe the functions that the audience sees the texts as performing.

The study therefore attempts to proffer answers to the following research questions:

- Which types of humor are used in OATT?
- By which strategies are these types of humor created?
- What mechanisms are employed within the identified strategies?
- What functions are the texts seen as performing?and
- What significance, if any, does online transmission of the videos have?

The study is significant in that the Oga at the Top series provide the first example of political humor using puppet characters on the Nigerian humor scene. Here we have multimodal phenomena, a blend of the semiotic resources of image, gesture, speech and music; appealing to the visual and auditory sensory modalities. This genre of humor lends itself to a multimodal analysis. The findings will therefore provide a systematic account of humor creation across a variety of modes. In addition, the study shows, via an audience reception analysis, that humor is not necessarily merely for laughter, and documents the social functions of a particular genre of humor, i.e., puppet political TV.

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