

Intermediality in Contemporary Nigerian Standup Comedy: The Gordons's Case

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ABSTRACT

Standup comedy in Africa has begun to attract interest in recent times, though for more than a decade this new artform has been in existence. On the Nigerian cultural scene, stand-ups are from both sides of the gender divide: Gordons, Akpororo, I Go Dye, on the male side; and Lepacious Bose, Helen Paul, on the female side. Scholars have studied linguistic, social, satirical and interactional spheres of this comedy, but have overlooked its intermedial formation, especially with respect to Gordons D'Berlusconi's comedic art. Because Gordons is versatile in linguistic modification, original in introduction of familiar terms in strange contexts, and astute in combining media domains, culminating in intermediality, this project draws on Werner Wolf's theorizing of intermediality—plurimediality and intermedial references—and the close reading method to analyse his art. This essay describes Gordons's standup comedy performances with a focus on his effective intermedial delivery of hilarious punch lines. Where plurimediality of music and language serve as the general backdrop of Gordons's "joke-Wards," intermedial references which explicitly mention and cite a medium or implicitly imitate another medium through quotation, evocation, or genre/form heighten the originality that endears him to listeners/viewers. In conclusion, his performance strategies are as intermedial as audience-conditioned.

KEYWORDS: standup comedy, plurimediality, Nigerian popular culture, intermediality, Gordons

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In Nigeria, standup comedy has a fairly long history. One was not sure what it was or was going to be until Ali Baba got hold of it, polished it, and gave it a strategic place on the Nigerian cultural scene (Ayakoroma). Its popularity, especially in the last fifteen years, has sparked off a considerable scholarly interest. The first batch of serious engagement was from disciplines other than dramatic arts and literary studies, particularly sociology (Obadare, “Uses” and “State”). Thereafter, studies from within the arts inquired into the pragmatic strategies deployed by stand-ups to ensure audiences identify with their jokes (Adetunji). Others followed, faintly hinting at the idea of the audience’s recuperation of meaning (Adejunmobi; Olayiwola; Filani, “Discourse Types,” “Stand-up Comedy,” and “Use”). Moradewun Adejunmobi’s essay, besides doing a survey of this comedy in Nigeria, offered ways of interrogating their contextual cultural praxis and the literary theories used in making sense of them (176). Elizabeth Olayiwola takes this notion even further by outlining the possible instances Nigerian standup comedians might have been heightening existing moral dread through the skewed representation of women, mostly in a sexist dimension.

On the recuperation of meaning from jokes, the following studies carried out by Ibukun Filani, which detail how humour becomes meaningful, are very significant. In “Discourse Types in Stand-up Comedy Performances: An Example of Nigerian Stand-up Comedy,” he argues that the joke context embraces the common beliefs held by both comedians and their audiences (43); in “The Use of Mimicry in Nigerian Stand-up Comedy,” he contends that standups resort to the use of mimicry as a strategy for connecting to the shared beliefs common to them and their audience (89); and in “Stand-up Comedy as an Activity Type,” he focuses on the ways that the manipulation of the frames of activity type may achieve interactional aims with the audience (74). Filani’s last essay, “Stand-up Comedy,” comes close to this present work, given that it analyses the different discursive frames put to use by Nigerian standups in their verbal arts to enhance interactivity with their audiences (77). However, considering discourse broadly as “language in context across all forms and modes” (Tannen x), and Filani’s adoption of Levinson’s social pragmatic theory of activity type to highlight “how social constraints and interactional goals influence a speaker’s choice of words and the hearer’s favoured interpretive patterns” (“Stand-up Comedy” 79), one wonders what enlightening information about these jokes could be accessed if one were to investigate the

diverse modes of verbal and nonverbal arts drawn on by these comedians. Most scholars, including Filani, have ignored the notion of intercross of modes in Nigerian jokes, even though these are clearly evident in the jokes. This study will therefore seek to understand the diverse sources of the verbal and nonverbal semiotic and signifying practices and how they formed a medley in a semiotic complex of standup comedy through the application of intermediality.

Rather than dwell on such comedians as MC Shakara, Eneche, Buchi, and Lepacious Bose studied by Filani (“Stand-up Comedy” 75); Ali Baba, Basketmouth, and Lepacious Bose already worked on by Adetunji (5); I Go Dye, a comedian studied by Olayiwola (51); or Youngest Landlord and Helen Paul, which Filani treated in his “Discourse Types” (48), this essay shall focus on Gordons D’Berlusconi (his moniker; full name: Godwin Komone). But why Gordons and what are the defining features of his comedy? Beginning his career in the early 2000s, he quickly rose to become one of the most popular comedians in Nigeria. Not only is he “a popular standup comedian,” who has received lavish references in critical studies, he is one comedian who is very versatile in linguistic modification and the introduction of familiar terms in strange contexts and astute in combining semiotic units from media domains, which offer useful material for the application of the concept of intermediality (Filani, “Discourse Types” 48). More than any other standup, he innovatively manipulates language in ways that thrill his audiences and hold them spell-bound, while engaging in some moralizing. He is noted for jocular euphemistic and exaggerative skits that are perceptibly intermedial. In contrast to other comedians, who publish their works in videos alone, affording viewers visual access to their performances, he initially chose (primarily for commercial purposes) the CD format, which can be played and listened to at home, in cars and in other places. Later, his performances were published in audio forms which were downloadable from *YouTube*, thanks to the Internet. The performances were later replicated in split bits in theatres, hotel halls and ballrooms, where he continues to perform live in consort with other comedians. In addition, he has labeled his comedy series: *Gordons Comedy Clinic Ward*. There are about six of them, and he seems to have reached his groove in parts 5 and 6. With no visual potentials, since his comedy series are released as audio files and not videos, his fans are compelled to listen raptly if they seek to gain maximally from it. Because the visual aspects of his comedy are missing, I will be applying intermediality to investigate his verbal art in this study.

Intermediality discloses, using Gordons's signifying/semiotic practice as a touchstone, the possible intermedial resource(s) Nigerian standups deploy in performances as they heighten the effects of their joke delivery to audiences. The intermedial occurrences and the characteristics of Gordons's *Comedy Clinic Ward* (Wards 5 and 6) will be the focus.

Intermediality must not be confused with intertextuality. Although Mikko Lehtonen defines the former as "intertextuality that transgresses media borders" (76), intertextuality has to do with textual discourses that echo ideas in other texts possessing characteristic semiotic fidelity to the referring signifying entity, at least in being radically transposable in language alone. Yet intermediality is distinguishable from multimodality, which happens "wherever two or more media are overtly present in a given semiotic entity at least in one instance" (Wolf, "Intermediality" 254). Media as used here should not be confused with the audience-related one (Zepetnek). Beyond overt cases of media meld, multimodality fails as a conceptual tool of analysis and description. It leaves off very implicit cases of media intercross. Moreover, it lacks requisite typological resources with which to discuss explicit and implicit signifying ramifications of intermedial artefacts.

Werner Wolf's theorizing of intermediality is of immense significance because he does so with both verbal (expressive) and literary arts and intermediality studies in mind. At some point, he identifies dramatic art, which comprises standup comedy, as "intermedial performance," involving words, sounds, music and visual submedia ("(Inter)mediality"). He defines medium as "the conventionally and culturally distinct means of communication specified not only by particular technical or institutional channels (or one channel) but primarily by the use of one or more semiotic systems in the public transmission of contents that include, but are not restricted to, referential 'messages.'" He notes that generally, "media make a difference as to what kind of content can be evoked, how these contents are presented, and how they are experienced" (2). This, to Wolf, is narrow. So he proposes that intermediality refers "to any transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media," comprising what he calls "extra-" and "intra-compositional" "relations between different media" ("Intermediality" 252). By relations, he means intermediality from synchronic and diachronic viewpoints. In the former, reference is made to individual artifacts, through development, conflation, resemblance, duplication,

or reference; and in the latter, in terms of meta-historical properties transcending the instance of the medium that bears them (Wolf, “(Inter)mediality”).

I shall illustratively tease out the strands of intermediality. The first is transmediality, by which Wolf means phenomena/issues that are nonspecific to individual media or are susceptible to scrutiny in a “comparative analysis of media in which the focus is not on one particular source medium” (“(Inter)mediality”). These phenomena are locatable in polymedia involving more than one media domain. Examples are mythic contents that have become historically parched in discourses and accepted as truths; for example, the Ogun myth, Oduduwa myth and so on. No Yoruba has a legitimate claim of ownership to these myths, and they can easily permeate the different media of the Yoruba cultural systems without any charge of plagiarism. Next is where a semiotic material in a literary medium is transposable to another medium or borrows from other media: we have intermedial transposition here, like the adaptations of literary works into films (Wolf, “(Inter)mediality”). In Nigeria, we have the instance of making Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* into films as presented by the Nigerian Television Authority in the late 80s. Both transmediality and intermedial transposition belong to extra-compositional intermediality.

The other pair contrasts with those above in that they indicate the narrow and strict sense of intermediality: plurimediality and intermedial reference. In these, the presence of other media is visible in a work where the multimedia relation is, in addition, a vital part of its meaning, as is the case with intermedial reference, or of its semiotic formation, as with plurimediality. Plurimedial communicative expressions generate media intercross, where components are linkable to their original diverse source-media (Wolf, “(Inter)mediality”). Intermedial reference, on the other hand, does not evince media blend of (verbal) signs, semiotic structures or some “plurisemiotic texts” that “expand the boundaries of systems of meaning” (Peñamarín). Instead, it posits semiotic homogeneity, thereby giving the impression of a miniature intracompositional intermediality, because intermedial references take place mainly on the trajectory of the signifiers of the prevailing source-media; say, English, where the signifiers in question are already existing in that source medium or language (Wolf, “(Inter)mediality”). Attention by the intermediality scholar is paid only to signifiers of the semiotic complex here, that is, the unit that houses these different intermedial (verbal) signs, even when they are linguistically varied

(Idris 70). Understanding intermedial references is, in the above instance, inseparable from and, as such is fundamental for, decoding the work.

Intermedial references can be broken into two main subtypes: the first, explicit reference, also known as “intermedial thematization,” best suited to “the context of verbal media,” implicates a heteromedial indication resident “in the signifieds of the referring semiotic complex, while its signifiers are in the usual way and do not contribute to heteromedial imitation” (Wolf, “(Inter)mediality”). That is, the unit containing intermedial references makes allusions through its verbal signs, called thematization. Explicit reference is easier identified in verbal media, since it surfaces as work/medium *a* gets mentioned/produced/discussed/“thematized” in medium *b*. A good example here is James Joyce’s creative thematization of Aristotle’s theory of *katharsis* in *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. Other examples abound. An alternate subtype is implicit reference or intermedial imitation, which “elicits an imagined as-if presence of the imitated heteromedial object or phenomena” (Wolf, “(Inter)mediality”). This can be realized in varied ways: the quotation of songs in a medium, either a novel or verbal unit; evocation, which exceeds thematization through the description of the heteromedial phenomenon; and formal imitation, like the tragic form or genre being imitated by other tragic works. Wolf asserts, “intermedial mixture are directly discernible on the surface of the work, that is, on the level of the signifiers, since they appear to belong to heterogeneous semiotic systems, although these components need not always be ‘quotable’ separately” (“Intermediality Revisited” 22). It seems clear now that this last strand of implicit reference—plot, characters, action, imagery, or formal imitation—is the basis for Aristotle’s *On the Art of Poetry* and much of literary theory. For instance, it is there in Vladimir Propp’s structuralism. According to Wolf, “the characteristic feature of formal imitation consists of an attempt at shaping the material of the semiotic complex in question (its signifiers, in some cases also its signifieds) in such a manner that it acquires a formal resemblance to typical features or structures of another medium or heteromedial work” (“(Inter)mediality”).

Gordons’s works could be examined intra-compositionally, in terms of the intermedial references, and somewhat in terms of plurimediality, but not extra-compositionally. This is because extra-compositional intermediality entails the nonspecificity of a semiotic domain such as myth and transposability of a semiotic system from one medium to another, both of which Gordons’s works

have not achieved, given that they are not themselves myths and have not until now been transposed to another medium such as narrative, opera, etc. Another reason is owed to the fact that his comedy evinces mainly the features of intra-compositionality, characteristic of the majority of verbal media. All of Gordons's *Wards* open with songs, and he appears to focus on such primary audiences as those travelling in automobiles. His instrumental sounds and songs are somewhat prefatory and theatrically prologic, and "thus analogous to a paratext" (Wolf, "Frames" 20). As an acoustic cultural artifact in the form of sound from his piano in the background intermeddles with the verbal expressive medium, occasioning the minute plurimedial status of Gordons's *Wards*, his comedy offers a first case of intermediality, where the respective heteromedia bear relation to semiotic signifying. Thus, Gordons's first instance of intermediality presents semiotic disparateness, that is, sound and words, from two different media.

Plurimedial communicative expressions generate media intercross, where components are linkable to their original diverse source-media. The meld of media, plurimediality, of the nonverbal medium of acoustic sound and songs begin all of Gordons's *Wards* (although only in "Ward 6" did Gordons identify the people for whom he sang and the reason for singing). In "Ward 6," he said his song was a prayer to God for safety and salvation for all those who travel from one place to the other or through any medium. In "Ward 5," an acoustic instrument, the organ, begins it. This is joined by a song that bespeaks a positive future or a crowning remark describing the extent to which he has lived and the struggles he has been through. He declares: "My life and destiny is beautiful ooh!" (Gordons, "Ward 5" 00:00:08-13). Beside the chorus or call and response which remains the same till the end of the song, the term "beautiful" is transposed by "wonderful," "colour" and "miracle" in subsequent call iterations. Thereafter, in the course of his comic narrations and punch lines, this song, setting the mood for the comedy, is called upon to intermittently interject transitions between the punch lines/joke unit ends and the beginning of another joke.

Like in "Ward 5," this same instance of plurimediality sets in the context for the entire standup media domain of "Ward 6." Whereas the sound evokes the sort found in very many musicals, Gordons's song gives it a Nigerian origin through the adoption of Nigeria's Urhobo traditional and highlife musical mode

and tune.¹ The same tune has also been appropriated in Urhobo Christian songs. However, in the plurimedial context, Gordons in the song thematizes the prayer medium of Judeo-Christians, which also continues after the song is over. In “Ward 5” (as in all his *Wards*), the intermedial trajectory of the music, song, and narration is manifest as the comedian sets up a hopeful world or future for his audience. Gordons bears in mind that his audience have been thrashed about by life’s tortuous storms and are consequently meeting for the therapeutic purposes of his comedy corpus, a *clinic* (misspelt “klinik”), and the CDs, as (hospital) *wards*, where each CD lasts more than an hour. From the song, he hoped his audience would receive some encouragement and stress relief. The above intermedial platform of music and words/songs subsists from the beginning to the end, as he from time to time makes forays into heteromedial sources to appropriate materials into the medium or semiotic complex of his standup comedy.

Later in “Ward 5,” Gordons stops the song and begins his narration in Standard English. The sequence remains in Standard English until he delivers his punch line in “Nigerian Pidgin” (Faraclas et al. 45), a language medium that intermeddles with other signifying media incorporated in the “Ward 5,” with each sequence segmented with Hallelujah, a Christian term of praise for Jehovah. We have an instance here illustrating the above, and even more:

The downfall of a man is not the end of his life, but it depends on where the man fall from. No be say you roll from chair fall for ground, you say it is the end. Eh-ehn! If you really want to check, climb Elephant House fall backward reach ground. In fact, before you reach ground, it shall be written: “And the man Died.”

Hallelujah!

...

Ehen, when you go church and them say turn to your neighbour and say, “it shall be permanent.” E go make you consider the condition of your neighbour before you say “It shall be permanent.”

¹ A major ethnic group in Delta State of Nigeria’s Niger Delta coexisting with Ukwuani, Isoko, Itsekiri, Ezon, and Ika ethnic groups. Having migrated from Benin kingdom, it became one of the groups that had early contact with the early Europeans in the pre-slavery days of Western adventurism. See Ekeh.

[The downfall of a man is not the end of his life, but it depends on where the man falls from. You don't say a man has fallen when he rolls from a chair to the floor. No! If you really want to know what it means to fall, climb Elephant House fall backward to the ground. In fact, before you get to the ground, it shall be written of you: "And the Man Died."

Hallelujah!

...

Now, when you go to church and you are told to turn to your neighbour and say "It shall be permanent." It is good you consider your neighbor's condition before saying it].

(Gordons, "Ward 5" 00:01:50-02:26, 00:02:59-03:18)

In the remarks above, within the main medium of the semiotic complex of Gordons's standup comedy, we notice the plurimediality of musical instrumentals, Standard English, Pidgin medium, on one hand, and instances of intermedial references, on the other. Both groups of intermedial instances (acoustic and verbal) belong to the major frame of intra-compositional intermediality. The media of English and pidgin, a second stage of intercross of verbal media, convey different (semiotic) signs, their signifiers and signifieds inclusive. Here, Gordons exhibits a characteristic feature of other Nigerian standup comedy, except for the musicals, adopted in order to heighten their humour and connect to the audience. Sometimes, he begins with the former medium (English) and delivers his punch line with the latter (Pidgin).

Uniquely, whereas in other climes with a vibrant mono-verbal medium, standup comedies are rendered with intermedial references clearly discernible, in Gordons, it would be hard to apply intermedial referential concepts solely without some modifications. This situation arises from the second order of plurimediality involving assorted expressive media which subsists in his entire Wards. He varies his verbal media even within his joke units and punch lines. Gordons offers scholars a markedly Nigerian type of plurimediality or intermedial references (which Wolf did not quite envisage, at least, in his theory of intermedial references), where the latter appears in forms of quotation, evocation and formal imitation through the signifiers of the existing source-medium of a verbal artefact. For example, in Gordons's case, it should have been either English or Pidgin, but not both in the same "pivot" (that is,

premises) and punch lines (Schwarz 64). Because listeners are conversant with both languages, Gordons's intermedial references take place in both. I would like to dub this kind of intermediality "plurireferential intermediality," to account for the peculiarly closely knit relationship between plurimediality (usually, between language and sound or any other medium/media; but in Gordons's case, between languages familiar to his audiences) and intermedial references existing in Gordons' and other comics' intermedial jokes and comedies.

Intermedial references above are of the explicit sort, thematization, where allusion is made to a known source. Gordons thematizes materials in formal socio-philosophical and literary media by quoting "The downfall of a man is not the end of his life" and "And the man died" in his joke's semiotic complex ("Ward 5" 00:02:23). The first is normally remarked as elixir for discouragement and throwing in the towel by one who has fallen from the level of success to that of failure. The latter item has literal and metaphorical implications. As the title of Wole Soyinka's popular prison autobiographical work, *The Man Died* (1972), it resonates with the literal death of any man and, metaphorically the "death" of some men. Any man who, in the face of intimidating and insufferable circumstances of life, keeps silent is adjudged by Soyinka to have died. One who quickly gives in to pressure by submitting to the strangulating forces of power can be regarded as one who "dies" hastily. Its reference in Gordons could have been informed by the sheer forcefulness with which Soyinka expressed his persecution during the Nigeria Civil War years and the nerve with which he bore it all, not willing to tread the timid course of silence—"death"—and freedom. Because Gordons's thematization is the explicit kind—the source is known—one gets the hint of this reference through the indication of the above terms' signifiers but not in heteromedially imitating them. In other words, Gordon's intermedial references did not exceed mentioning to include a duplication of the semiotic medium it cited. For example, he did not elaborate on the chapters or important segments of, and incidents in, the book *The Man Died*, neither did he tell us the origin and the process through which the "downfall of a man is not the end of his life" came to be so socially acceptable in the informal life of Nigerians.

Same applies to "Hallelujah," an exclamation in the Christian semiotic medium and "It shall be permanent," a peculiarly Nigerian Pentecostal Christian expression. The latter expression is the refrain of the churchsong:

“What the Lord has done for me, / It shall be permanent” repeated twice before and once after it (“Ward 5” 00:03:12). Thus, it falls within the Christian verbal semiotic medium. Gordons leaves no one in doubt as to the medium he was intermedially referring to by “when you go church” (“Ward 5” 00:02:62). The song is sung to indicate that the blessings received from God would not be short-lived. So when the pastor asks each member of the congregation to tell their neighbour “[i]t shall be permanent,” he was making reference to the refrain of this song, implying their blessings would remain. But the deconstructive twist to the refrain, where Gordons’ punch line is derived and vibrates with intensity, exists in the congregation—that not everybody has been “blessed,” or the church has not been so blessed as to lack anyone unblessed. So telling a lame worshipper “[i]t shall be permanent” amounts to cursing and cutting him off from the blessing for which the expression was meant to retain. In this joke unit, the explicit intermedial reference takes place. He only refers to the semiotic medium of Pentecostal Christianity through his jokes’ signifiers, which does not lead to heteromedial imitation, a copious copying, of the referred semiotic medium.

Going back to “plurireferential intermediality,” this unique intermediality, where English and Pidgin are almost inextricably melded to create a platform for launching intermedial references, we find that Gordons thematizes both religious semiotic medium through heteromedial reference and imitation. The last, heteromedial imitation, is evident in the deployment of the verbal performance codes of Pentecostal pastors in Nigeria, their voice, demonstration, and words. Through this imitation, or evocation, Gordons takes the listener beyond the explicit reference indicated by the signifiers to “imagined as-if presence of the imitated heteromedial object or phenomena” (Wolf, “(Inter)mediality”) of Nigerian Pentecostal pastors. His verbal behaviour adds description to the heteromedial phenomenon being evoked. In his performance, deducible through his voice, the pastor is Gordons’s character, the viewers who buy tickets to watch his show are the congregants, and the money with which tickets were bought, the offertory. He also intermedially thematizes the ethnic medium of Nigeria. What seems a cluster of intermediality appears in an interesting rankshifting order. I shall illustrate.

In the second narrative unit, the pastor in a hysterical mood asks the congregants to do something crazy for the Lord. Transiting from the comparative to the superlative of “crazy,” a member walks to the offering box

and “discharge” (carries it away). The pastor remarks: “If you no bring money, I go add leprosy join your condition. Bring my osusu back quickly [If you don’t bring the money back, I will add leprosy to your miserable condition. Bring my osusu back quickly!]” (“Ward 5” 00:04:10).² The word “discharge,” ordinarily a non-Pidgin Standard English sign-slang, indicates “run away.” The joke thematizes it in order to heighten its humour. “Osusu,” a sign in both Pidgin and Urhobo language, denotes thrift institution or the activity of saving money through this means. By thematizing (quoting but not elaborating and discussing) this sign and heteromedially imitating the verbal behaviour of pastors in Nigeria in the above instance and throughout his jokes when referring to money or money-making acts, Gordons equates the sacredness surrounding offering to God in church services to the principle of contribution characteristic of *osusu*. He consequently hints at the general notion of the commercialized intents of most new generation churches in Nigeria.

Again, peculiar to Gordons, his trademark narrational skill is what I term “hierarchical intermediality,”³ the sort of intermedial relationship existing in a subordinating order amongst semiotic units from heteromedial sources contained in a semiotic complex. For instance, “osusu” and “discharge” intermeddle, at a third remove, within the medium of Pidgin, a language that also intermediates with Standard English at a second layer of language or linguistic (medial) intercross. This intermediality goes ahead to be subordinated to the first lap of intermediality between music and language. In the course of this essay, these shall be identified whenever they are found. For instance:

You know everybody is preparing for Rapture now. Even our pastors are preparing for rapture. Since rapture is all about flying, they are buying private jet now. Jesus go shock that day when

² A term with no definite origin, but unquestionably belonging to one of the coastal languages. In Pidgin, it literally denotes the local thrift or the institution via which that activity is engaged; metaphorically, the church offering, which to the pastor has become money given him from the local “thrift.”

³ The sort of intermediality occurring in a subordinating order and existing amongst semiotic units from heteromedial sources in a semiotic complex. It differs from “plurireferential intermediality.” While the former refers to an instance of overlapping intermediality, the latter describes the state where English and Pidgin are almost inextricably melded to create a platform for launching intermedial referential expressions. It attempts to redescribe the framework necessary for the productive application of intermedial references as theorized by Wolf. It describes a lack, thereby making up for the shortcoming of Wolf’s earlier theory originating from the difficulty of applying “intermedial references” theory to Gordons. As observed, the same phenomenon has motivated different nomenclatures, owing to the process and functional disposition of Gordons’s peculiar intermediality.

some people go arrive with Arik, say, O boy, you can't leave me for hell fire o. Na all of us na e work the work.

[You know everybody is preparing for Rapture now. Even our pastors are preparing for Rapture (Christ's catching of righteous Christians in his Second Coming). Since Rapture is all about flying, Pastors are buying private jets. Jesus will be shocked on that day to see some people arrive with Arik Airlines planes and will say to him: "Man, you think you will leave me in hell fire? We all worked together!"].

(Gordons, "Ward 5" 00:05:08-28)

Covertly making a biting commentary on the acquisitive propensity of some Nigerian Pentecostal pastors, Gordons not only intermedially thematizes the semiotic units "Jesus" and "Rapture" from the medium of the Christian religion through explicit references, but also engages in implicit intermedial reference by evoking the heteromedial phenomenon of rapture in a much more elaborate manner with his reference to Arik Airlines and the jets acquired by pastors. The whole joke is hinged on the two terms "Jesus" and "Rapture." These terms interrelate with another medial unit, Arik Air,⁴ with which he equates flying in the air through airplanes to flying to meet Jesus during the Rapture. Another term explicitly thematized is "hell fire," the place of torment for sinners who die without having their sins forgiven by Jesus Christ in Judeo-Christian scriptures. It is a case of intermedial reference where the signifier is mentioned/discussed but not reproduced in order to achieve an as-if, as with "Rapture." Yet what jars listeners is the starting point of the flight, which substitutes for Rapture in the above evocation. The pastors took off not from any airport in the real world, but from somewhere in hell fire. This raises a rough issue requiring some smoothening. Why would pastors wishing to see Jesus in heaven take off from hell fire rather than from earth? The answer is that the otherworld, intermedially referred to in Gordons's joke unit, seems to be in excess of what the Christian scriptures semiotic medium stipulates. In them, hell is not a place for corporeal beings, but for preternatural ones who have lost their flesh and have taken up the unleshly, and if any one must leave to meet Jesus, it should not be from hell but from earth. However, if one

⁴ Short for Arik Airlines, a domestic airline in Nigeria.

understands that Gordons is satirizing the money-loving clergy that have walked back on the salvation message committed to them and are now having a reckless outlook on life such that they are devoted to God only to the point that obedience serves their own selfish interests, then he has some points in assuming that their avarice already qualifies them as candidates for hell. He seems to be saying that if the pastors went to see Jesus, it would be from somewhere in hell fire. His evocation makes sense then.

Gordons sometimes, in his attempt to please through intermedial sign/semiotic clustering, does not narrate straightforwardly. He narrates in “Ward 5”:

I thank God for the Governor of Cross River State.⁵ E dey train all Calabar (capital city) girls to be pilots simply because say Calabar girls discover say there is a compartment in the plane that is called cockpit.⁶

[I thank God for the Governor of Cross River State. He is training all Calabar girls to become pilots. The girls’ interest was aroused by the presence of a compartment in the plane that is called cockpit].

(00:07:36-49)

First, he tells of the good work of the Governor of Nigeria’s Cross River State, who, in an effort to give a lift to his people, has initiated a programme of training girls from the state (using the generic term “Calabar,” the state’s capital) to become pilots because of the cockpit section of the plane. Gordons suggests that the training was the initiative of the girls and not of the governor, although it requires the governor’s assent, as he would be the one to pay for it and provide logistics. Above, Gordons is punning on the word: “cock,” a polysemous word and the first term of the seeming compound word, “cockpit.” With respect to the context of this joke, it vulgarly denotes male erectile sexual organ, the penis. So when he jokes, passing the offensive sexual denotation of “cock” to his audience, he not only overestimates the kind gesture of the Governor, but

⁵ One of Nigeria’s thirty-six states or federating units.

⁶ Calabar girls Calabar refers to the capital of Cross River State, but synecdoche for Cross River and neighboring Akwa Ibom State. Girls from these states.

exhumes the strong but unfounded stereotype of promiscuity ascribed to women from Cross River State of Nigeria. This stereotype belongs to neither the pidgin nor the Standard English media, but to the Nigerian social medium and space. It just marks one of the many lenses through which people from an ethnic Other in Nigeria are improperly made sense of and the diverse media that Gordons picks his joke items from to bring about intermediality.

Thus, the sign “cock” is not a heteromedial one and of course has no place in Pidgin vocabulary. It is a homomedial term, at least against the backdrop of the medium of English, whose signifier and signified are homogeneous with the referring semiotic complex (English). Therefore, it would have been a quotation, thematization, evocation, and there would have been no intermedial reference. Yet this seeming absence of intermedial reference brings to relief the resonance and evocation of a unique sort, the one resident in the cultural medium of the Nigerian social space commonly shared by both the comic and the audience, the sort Filani highlighted in his essay (“Stand-up Comedy” 77). It is this shared knowledge of existing stereotype that bestowed the first innocent term “cock” with the intermedial referential status, ably accentuated by “Calabar girls.” In a sense, the term “cock,” used in the same vein with “Calabar girls,” with all its cultural echoes and evocations amongst Nigerians, has now been thematized (become an explicit intermedial reference) in the above joke in a veiled reference to sexual promiscuity. But it also undertakes the implicit intermedial reference as the joke unit is stretched to further elaborate on the place of “cock” in the punch line. In this undertaking, civility inhibits obvious elaboration of the activity of sex in the cockpit of planes, while leaving listeners to make full sense of what his punch line does halfway. However, this intermedial reference is not immediately obvious to non-Nigerians. Only Nigerians would notice that he had said enough for the ears of civilized society and that was the reason he stopped at that.

A similar leveraging of stereotypes existing in Nigeria’s socio-cultural space or medium for semiotic units, an eventual thematization, takes place in his joke (presented here in standard English) on the Igbo in “Ward 5”:

Anybody who says Igbo people love money more than any other tribe in this nation has not spoken well. This is because every ethnic group [in Nigeria] loves money. If you are hearing my voice

now and you are a non-Igbo man and you hate money, raise your hand, if poverty will not strangle you tonight. . . .

So Igbo people don't love money more than Yoruba, Ijaw and other ethnic stocks. We all love money. But the love for money in the Igbo man has a very high voltage. In T. B. Joshua's church recently, one of the wise men was praying for a demoniac girl.⁷ He laid hands on the girl and she started thrashing about. Wise man Daniel then asked, "Who are you in this body?" The girl replied, "I am the queen [spirit] of the marine kingdom." He asked again, "What have you done to this body?" The girl said, "They sent me from the marine world to give this woman two billion dollars." When Daniel heard of two billion dollars, he tip-toed and took a step of faith towards the demoniac and asked softly, "Have you given her the money?" She said, "No!" He said, "I beg of you! Leave that body and enter mine, I plead!" (Gordon, "Ward 5" 00:11:46-13:21).

It is not apparent to which ethnic group the wise man Daniel belonged, but it is likely Gordons's remarks implied he is Igbo. What is perceptible though is that even in sacred grounds like the church, its leaders are victims of avarice and greed. He does much to illustrate the stereotype of the Igbo, whose love for money is assumed to be of "high voltage," a semiotic item intermedially referred to and evoked, exceeding thematization, in the semiotic complex of Gordons's standup comedy. It exceeds thematization through the description of the heteromedial phenomenon echoed. For example, his narration above goes to authenticate his claim that the Igbo's love for money is astonishing. It is the implicit sort of intermedial reference. The reference is both to the signifiers and signifieds. The latter is presented to listeners through an elaboration or heteromedial imitation of what it means for an object or human being to have behavioral characteristics ascribable to electrical "high voltage." His narrating the event, that is, his evocation of the stereotypical codes existing in Nigeria's social domain or medium regarding the love of money is accomplished by citing a vivid instance which is in itself a case of evocation—the implicit kind of intermedial reference. Meanwhile, his evocation of the religious action of

⁷ Co-ministers with T. B. Joshua, the chief reverend minister of Synagogue Church of all Nations headquartered in Lagos, Nigeria.

exorcism derived from the Christian religious medium through dramatization accentuates his description by eliciting “an imagined as-if presence of the imitated” phenomenon (Wolf, “(Inter)mediality”).

In a joke segment in “Ward 6,” Gordons also makes reference to demons (to him, synonymous to the demoniac) and thematizes semiotic units from the Christian religious medium. He hoped that in doing this, he would be contrasting African demons to American demons. But what he leaves in the wake of his linguistic razzmatazz is intermediality. In this joke, Gordons’s character travelled abroad and would meet demons there: demons who “wear short skirts,” “read newspapers,” “eat carrot and drink juice,” and just when they are about to be exorcised by Pastors, they willingly leave their host. But in Africa, instead of demons, there are “familiar spirits” who “know you” and “you know them” and they are very stubborn, not easily yielding to exorcism. More than the usual intermediality characteristic of Gordons’s standup comedy, which includes plurimediality and explicit intermedial references, in the form of thematization, and other implicit intermedial modes such as quotation/citation/mentioning and evocation of heteromedial semiotic items, Gordons above engages in another sort of implicit intermedial referencing, that of form or genre, where the referring semiotic complex acquires the generic/formal properties of a prior existing medium. In this intermedial unit, the trope of nonhuman beings displaying such human attributes as speaking, hearing, tasting, and possessing intelligence is adopted from the formal medium of folktales. In this form, the character enjoys somewhat of a suspension of commonplace laws of nature, as we find “talking animals” exhibiting other human attributes that are capable of reducing the story line to that of “legend, folktale, *märchen*” and related literary genres (Frye 33).

Whereas “pastors” and “demons” are explicit signifiers indicating intermedial references to the Christian medium, “short skirts,” reading “newspapers,” eating “carrot” and drinking fruit “juice” add another intermedial perspective of bringing the work to the level of the routine social life of cultured humans. So the objects belong to the social medium, but the action undertaken hauls it into the generic form of the folktale. The above actions remind one of the interactions between nonhumans and humans in Onwuka Okereke’s “Why Men Die” (1975), or the trickster character, spider or tortoise, in many traditional African tales. For example, Efua Sutherland’s folklore-derived text, *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975), presents the trickster

spider that had a marriageable beautiful (spider!) daughter whose suitors were human chiefs. She could operate the typewriter and speak English and could be one more wife to any of the four fabulous human chiefs. With Gordons's bestowal of modern human habits on inanimate and abstract beings, another work, Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), rings a bell with listeners. In this text, the perfect gentleman (only a skull), "dressed with the finest and most costly clothes," went to a village market, sold his article for two thousand pounds and enticed a lady (Tutuola 18). On his way back, he returns the body parts lent him to their owners. "When they (with the lady) reached where he hired both arms, he pulled them out and gave them to the owner" and "paid them. . . . [T]hey reached the place where he hired the neck, he pulled it out and gave it to the owner and paid for it as well. . . . Now this complete gentleman in the market was reduced to a 'SKULL'" (20-21). When the narrator and his wife met abstract entities such as Drum, Song and Dance on the road, they all began to dance for five days without eating. As the narrator and his wife continued their journey, two strange and large hands came out from a white tree and beckoned them. Getting closer, the tree's doors opened and they were led into the Faithful Mother's hall inside the tree "decorated with about one million pounds" (68). Here, they ate, drank and danced for days.

These are a few cases of the humanizing of inanimate or nonhuman things that jar listeners/viewers/readers. Habits like spending money, eating food and wearing clothes employed by Gordons can now be vividly seen across such semiotic sources and media as bearing folkloric principles to which his joke skit makes formal implicit intermedial reference. By ascribing such modern behaviours to demons, he is not so much superimposing folkloric features on the purely Christian concept of "demons" as approximating this heteromedial semiotic sign to the carnal and humanly within the semiotic complex of stand-up comedy. He might have lacked authenticity in thematising the term demon. His is a poor attempt at evoking it by providing a joking elaboration on the distinction between African and Western demons. But it is not successful because the contrasts set up cannot equate the signified "demons" as entrenched in the biblical semiotic medium.

Another implicit intermedial reference, in the manner of heteromedial imitation of semiotic genres or forms, occurs in Gordons. This time, it is the form of traditional African incantation found everywhere in Nigeria, but mainly

in the Yoruba folkloric stock. The incantation privileges natural (behavioral) laws that are fairly constant. Gordons narrates in his joke:

The lizard cannot become a crocodile, no matter how long he stays in the water. That is the way life is. There is no way you can be a friend to El-Rufai and hate short people. There is no way you will be friend to Taiye Taiwo and hate chimpanzee. It is like saying you like fat people but you hate striae. It is not possible. They go together forever, forever. (“Ward 5” 00:08:01-31).

The impossibility of breaching natural laws forms the basis for further thematizations of semiotic units from other medial sources. But in elaborating these through the image of crocodile, El-Rufai (a squat former federal minister), Taiye Taiwo (national footballer deemed ugly by fans) and fat people, he thematizes the traditional African incantatory oral poetry genre. This may be (un)known to him. The natural law or barrier has a limiting force for the lizard, which can never transmute to a crocodile, no matter the length of time it spends in the water/rivers; or one being a friend of the Nigerian footballer, who would never hate chimpanzees, or one who loves fat people but hates stretch marks.

The following instance of incantation in Yoruba folklore exemplifies the above incantatory form in Gordons’s joke: “You cannot dispute the forest with a rat. / You cannot dispute the savannah with the buffalo. / You cannot dispute this father’s title with Olukere. / You cannot play with a snake. / You cannot dance with a praying mantis. / A small child cannot beat his mother. / An old man cannot get annoyed with his own shit. / A woman cannot look at the penis—without being glad. / Look at me then, and be glad!” (“Incantation” 342). The last line displays the culmination of the premise set up by previous lines. They proffer grounds for the incontrovertibility of the last line. One observes a similarity of form between Gordons’ joke above and this incantation. Gordons might have incorporated mainly humans in creating his premise, with joke as his ultimate aim. However, the incantation is much more serious. Interestingly, both are performance-oriented. Below is another incantatory form: “The children are enjoying themselves with the birds. / Children of the house, elders of the house, / Men, women, young and old, / You cannot see a new born babe—without happiness. / I am now a new born babe; / Come and dance with me” (342).

The only time Gordons minimally resorts to linguistic intermediality or intermediality of the sign like the cases above was during his narration, where the medium of narration is only in Standard English and he seems to be literally living out the metaphoric caption of his CDs as “comedy clinics” and “wards”—hospital wards. Possibly, he was getting serious, away from the lighthearted ambience characterizing the other sequences and skits. He prays for his listeners that they be healed of their ailments and delivered from shackles, offers them wisdom tidbits derived from animal traits or character, and delivers a benediction. These three segments of prayer for deliverance, wisdom tidbits and benediction are essentially peculiar to Gordons. It is typical of all his other Wards and they are all rooted in the different media-sources from where they are appropriated into the standup comedy medium. From the Judeo-Christian Pentecostal medium, he adopts the prayers of deliverance. This segment is almost entirely in the format of intermedial reference, given that it is a straight talk to a homogeneous church-listening audience and Gordons does not feel doubtful of his reception. This could be the reason why there is almost a no-media blend amongst the signifiers, except for the introduction of the medium of prayer. Signifiers take place in the subsisting Pentecostal source-media. Just a few verbal units as “acid and bomb” made to collocate with “Holy Ghost” are the only heteromedial units present, and they also comprise what naturally should jar the listening audience. They find these items unimaginably absent in the semiotic system of Christianity familiar to them. But it would however please them because of the “militarizing” of the impact of the Holy Ghost’s fight to deliver them from their predicaments. If, as a case, bombs and acid are deployed to fight the attackers, it then means the foes would definitely be vanquished and the freedom of the oppressed guaranteed. This sequence was not meant to elicit laughter, but after he concludes, he issues one humorous expression by saying: “T. B. Joshua dey try oh! E no easy! [T. B. Joshua is trying! It is not easy!]” (“Ward 5” 00:42:05-09). But this does not deliver because the sacralised atmosphere was yet to dissipate. It was a jerky transition that does not follow from a humorous premise.

In all the analysis above, Gordons’s effectiveness in delivering hilarious punchlines is rooted in his active intermedial capabilities. His works have been analyzed mainly from the perspective of intra-compositional intermediality, that is, where the intermediality in terms of intermedial references and plurimediality are the focus of attention and not the extra-compositional sort.

This is attributed to his comedy evincing mainly the features of the former, the characteristics of all verbal media. Where plurimediality of music and language serve as the general backdrop of Gordons's joke *Wards*, intermedial references, where he either explicitly mentions and cites a medium or implicitly imitates another medium through quotation, evocation, or genre/form, subsist and accentuate the originality that most listeners/viewers note about him.

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