

## What's App Jokes: A reflection on the Nigerian Lifestyle during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*This paper investigates the language of humour in a Nigerian context with a view to showing how the peculiarity of Nigerian culture, which is largely linguistically indexed in this instance, underlies what may be identified as humorous. Employing Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), which involves the description, interpretation and explanation of social phenomena using data in different modes, such as verbal text, visual/pictorial text and audio text, the paper examines purposively selected WhatsApp jokes on COVID-19 collected over a period of five months. The pragmatics-driven study shows that the Nigerian online jokes reflect various facets of life and living conditions in contemporary Nigeria. Even in the midst of the pervasive gloom, the Nigerian's zest for life remains profound and this seemingly unshakeable vivacity is noted in the people's capacity for humour and laughter.*

**Keywords:** *Nigerian English, Online Humour, WhatsApp, Communication, Context.*

### 1.0 Introduction

On 31 January 2020, following the reported spread of COVID-19 from Wuhan, China to other parts of the world (see Zhu, Wei & Niu, 2020; Phelan, Katz & Gostin, 2020), the Federal Government of Nigeria established a Coronavirus Preparedness Group to moderate the impact of the virus if it eventually spread to the country. On February 27, 2020, the government announced the first confirmed case when an Italian citizen tested positive for the virus in Lagos. In a move to combat the spread of what had now been identified as a pandemic (WHO, 2020a, 2020b), the President ordered the cessation of all movements in Abuja (the Federal Capital Territory, FCT), Lagos and Ogun states for an initial period of 14 days starting from 11 p.m. on Monday, 30th March 2020. Further extensions were imposed until 3rd May 2020, when the government announced a phased and gradual easing of lockdown measures in the three areas. As of 22 September, 2020, seven months after the first case was announced, Nigeria had 57,437 confirmed cases, 7,663 active cases, 48,674 recoveries, 1,100 deaths and only 480,874 samples tested. The COVID-19 pandemic, like cases of crisis, natural or human-induced disaster, has been a time of significant stress, notably associated with the uncertainty regarding possible duration and discovery of a cure or preventative vaccine.

This ongoing stress cuts across all socio-demographic variables (e.g., age, socioeconomic status, gender) and is worse for some already vulnerable segments of the population (e.g., the elderly, the poor, those with pre-existing health problems). With lockdowns and movement restrictions in place in many states, levels of loneliness, depression, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as self-harm or suicidal behaviour may also have been on the increase. To have sound mental health and cope with tension and anxiety during the pandemic, psychologists and

psychiatrists encouraged people to focus on things within their control, such as taking care of their general health, minding their diet, getting adequate sleep and exercise, avoiding unreliable news, connecting with loved ones remotely and calling for professional help when necessary (Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020; Søvold, 2020; Williams & Fox, 2020).

Jokes/humour also played significant roles during the lockdown, given their capacity to help ease stress and tension (Saricali et al., 2020; Chiodo, Broughton & Michalski, 2020). Jokes provide an outlet for unconscious, repressed and ‘forbidden’ feelings, such as desire, phobia or fear of the strange, with laughter acting as a valve to free us from inhibitions. In other words, jokes or humour enable us to deal with difficult things in an indirect way and talk about things that we normally feel unable to. By joking about the coronavirus, therefore, we play down the seriousness of the situation and thus ease some of the nervousness that might otherwise gnaw at us consciously or unconsciously. A joke is a display of humour in which words are used within a specific and well-defined narrative structure to make people laugh. A joke is not meant to be taken seriously. It takes the form of a story, usually with a dialogue that ends in a punchline, which calls the listener’s attention to a second, conflicting meaning. This can be done using a pun or other form of wordplay such as irony or sarcasm, a logical incompatibility, nonsense, or other means (Wikipedia). Since humour is not a property of sentences but of utterances, it always depends on a context for its existence (Ferrar, 1992: 16). Consequently, what is seen as a joke in one culture may not be a joke in another culture.

A particular object, animal, person, scandal, issue, or TV programme can generate thousands of jokes for a few months, then disappear. Many of the jokes could turn up again later in some new settings. Many cultural differences exist in joke telling and subject matter. It is a fairly common experience not to see how a joke in a foreign language is funny. However, certain themes run across many languages. It is interesting to note the way in which the same joke turns up in very different cultures. An example is the way social or regional groups are stereotyped as stupid so that merely by saying “There was this man from X...,” the listener knows that a foolish action is to follow. For example, in England, there are jokes about the Irish. Similar jokes are made in Dublin about people from Cork; and in Cork, jokes are often made about people from Galway. In Tonga, such jokes are made about people from Ena. In Jordan, there are jokes about people from the village of Al-Sareeh. Similarly, several Central African tribes refer to Pygmy groups in this way (Crystal, 1997: 62).

In Nigeria, there are certain jokes known as “Akpos” jokes. “Akpos”, which is a clipped form of some common names such as Akporodo, Akpofure, Onoakporobo, Akpororo, Akporobaro, etc. (from the Niger Delta region), is an imaginary character often portrayed as stupid. Davies (1990) opines that the stupidity identity is attached to “Akpos” because the character is viewed as a representation of the minority ethnic group in the Delta region sometimes perceived by dominant groups in Nigeria as being lazy, restless and unserious while always seeking the easiest route to wealth. Similarly, people from Ibadan (in southwest Nigeria) are often the target of everyone’s joke for their poor pronunciation of certain English words.

Jokes are said to be culture-specific and context dependent. It is important to have background knowledge of something in order to find humour in the joke made out of that thing. Following Nneji (2013) and Lamidi (2016), it is argued here that culture and society play a vital role in identifying an action or talk as humorous. The ability to interpret or identify humorous acts depends on one’s cultural knowledge of that particular society. This is supported by Psathas

(1995) who asserts that the machinery for the production of humour is culturally based and involves members' 'competences' (p. 50). The 'competences' of members include the 'ability' to deduce humour from objects, events and people. 'A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members ...' that knowledge is socially acquired: the necessary behaviours are learned and do not come from any kind of genetic endowment. Therefore, culture is the 'know-how' that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living. Only for a few does it require a knowledge of some, or much music, literature and the arts (Goodenough, 1957:167 cited in Wardhaugh, 2006:221).

In many post-military 'democratic' regimes across Africa, humour and ridicule have emerged as means through which ordinary people attempt to deconstruct and construct meaning out of a reality that is somewhat bizarre. 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 (Obadare, 2009: 241). A 2003 New Scientist survey of over 65 countries adjudged Nigerians to be the happiest people in the world. What is the explanation for this seeming paradox of vivacity amid anomie? Why does laughter constantly reverberate in spaces and places where everyone (including those laughing) agrees there is little or nothing to laugh about? Obadare (2009) opines that laughter serves a variety of functions for the oppressed African subject – as 'vengeance', 'coping mechanism', a 'means of escape', 'subversion', as well as a means of 'resistance'.

In addition to this introduction, this paper has five other sections. While the next section is a review of the relevant literature, the third section highlights theoretical issues around the subject matter. This is followed by a brief discussion of the methodology as a prelude to the data analysis and discussion of findings. The last section is the conclusion.

## **2.0 Highlights of Empirical Studies on Humour/Jokes**

A number of studies have been undertaken on humour/jokes in Nigerian contexts. Adedimeji (2002) is a pragmatic study of a selection of Nigerian jokes. The author identifies jokes as locutionary acts, such that when presented with the appropriate illocutionary force, they result in the perlocutionary effect of humour. The study uses anecdotal jokes as data. Bello and Bayagbon's (2002) study focuses on jokes at drinking centres. They analyse some sociolinguistic variables and inferences deriving from socio-cultural knowledge as well as the speech situation and context. The authors conclude that it takes more than linguistic knowledge to interpret an utterance from a member of a different social group. Sociolinguistic knowledge is a major parameter for understanding information in discourse.

Nneji (2013) undertakes a semantico-pragmatic analysis of Nigerian jokes with the intention of determining to what extent a Nigerian man's jokes conform to the different theories of humour, especially the incongruity theory which assumes that humour is the combination of two or more ideas which are supposed to be utterly disparate. Since humour is culture-specific, the study focused on six Nigerian jokes covering different facets of the sociocultural life of the Nigerian man. The paper reveals that the lifestyle of Nigerians is clearly depicted in the jokes they crack. Applying discourse theory to stand-up comedy, Filani (2015) postulates two contexts for jokes by male and female Nigerian stand-up comedians. The analysis reveals that stand-up comedians perform discourse types, which are specific communicative acts in the

context of the joke, such as greeting/salutation, reporting and informing, which bifurcates into self-praising and self-denigrating.

Lamidi's (2016) work examines the pragmatic factors that account for the interpretation of a post as humorous, with data being purposively sampled from the archives of Nairaland Virtual Community and subjected to a qualitative analysis. Lamidi found that humour patterns, pragmatic factors and humour markers are the processing elements in humour interpretation in the studied virtual community. The work concludes that the online context alone is not enough to cue humour in computer-mediated communication. Contextualising online humour in the real-world situation is, therefore, required in the interpretation of the conversation as humorous. Similar to Filani (2015), Kehinde (2016) explores how violation of the Gricean maxims is used to create humour in stand-up comedies in Nigeria. The paper is based on the transcription of five episodes of the popular comedy series "Night of a Thousand Laughs". Kehinde found that the Gricean maxims were both applied and violated in the process of creating humour. During most of the performances, the comedians would have obeyed the maxims before consciously or unconsciously defying them.

### **3.0 Theoretical Framework**

Given the place of context in the creation and consumption of humour, this study is best approached within the framework of pragmatics, which deals with our ability to convey and interpret verbal and visual messages. Pragmatics has to do with speaker meaning and the interpretation of utterances in context. Pragmatics scholars such as Austin (1962), Searle (1969) and Grice (1975) argue that the situation of an utterance is important in the understanding of the linguistic signs employed by the speaker. Humour as a mode of communication is also best interpreted through its context of use because of the deep interpretation it requires. And as Lyons (1995) suggests, "context determines meaning" (p. 265).

Several definitions of pragmatics emphasise the importance of the mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs), intention, world knowledge, presupposition, implicatures, inference and/or context (whether sociological, psychological, linguistic or sociocultural). Bach and Harnish (1979) consider Mutual Contextual Beliefs (MCBs) as the major requirement participants need in the interpretation of what is said and the sense behind the utterance. They also note that in any speech situation the speaker (S) has an intention and the listener or hearer (H) will make some inferences on which they will base their role on specific facts shared by them. These facts are fundamental to the understanding and interpretation of the message(s). They argue that for speakers to perform illocutionary acts, their hearers must understand what such acts mean, as well as whether the acts are within or without the boundaries of 'literalness'.

Bach and Harnish (1979) also state that mutual contextual beliefs between speaker (S) and hearer (H), together with their world knowledge, will facilitate the inferential process. This is established through their understanding of what is implied (implicature) and what brings about the utterance (presupposition). Pragmatic success or the ability to decode the sense and intention of an utterance is attained through implicature and presupposition, which are the semantic determinants of the context of use. The concepts of implicature and presupposition are key to analysing the meaning of language in use. According to Lawal and Raji (1997), implicature is "the midway between what is said and what is implied but not entailed or stated overtly," while presupposition "is the explicit assumption about the real world which speakers

make and on which the meaning of an utterance largely depends” (p. 639). Presuppositions are background beliefs which constitute the common ground shared by participants. As such, joke recipients will find a joke amusing only if they are able to identify what the joke teller has taken for granted. In other words, jokes often require shared knowledge for a recipient to understand and appreciate them (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Filani, 2017). The lack of knowledge to interpret utterances as humorous results in pragmatic failure, which is described by Thomas (1983) as the inability to understand “what is meant by what is said”. Given that backdrop, this paper employs mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs), presupposition and implicature as the three relevant concepts in the analysis of the data. The three work together in the interpretation of utterances made in communication. Presuppositions have to do with the background assumptions and shared knowledge (worldview) through which utterances in conversation make sense, while the additional non-literal but contextually relevant inferred portion of meaning in a conversation makes up the implicature.

In the jokes examined in this paper, presuppositions are informed by the sociocultural contexts of the jokes, including assumptions about language, culture, the scenarios presented in the joke and the general Nigerian cultural context. In uncovering the presuppositions, attention is given to the form of language used in the jokes, the meaning potential of the joke texts and the situation to which the joke refers.

The study also employs Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), which is the description, interpretation and explanation of social phenomena using data in different modes or ‘text’ forms, such as verbal text, visual/pictorial text and audio text. Discourse analysis has traditionally focused on verbal text, but the field of social semiotics now makes it possible to analyse verbal and audiovisual texts at once. The data set used in the study, for instance, comprises verbal and visual text, each complementing the other. Examples of works in MDA include Goodwin (2000), Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), Scollon (2001), Norris (2004), Jewitt (2014), Norris and Maier (2014), Norris (2016), Jewitt et al. (2016) and Alyousef (2016).

#### **4.0 Methodology**

Recognising the fact that the Internet and mobile telephony allow information to travel very quickly and WhatsApp messages are a veritable, insidious site for the propagation of jokes, WhatsApp jokes on COVID-19 were collected over a period of five months from several WhatsApp groups. The data collected were then subjected to qualitative content analysis and logical deductions.

#### **5.0 Data Presentation and Discussion**

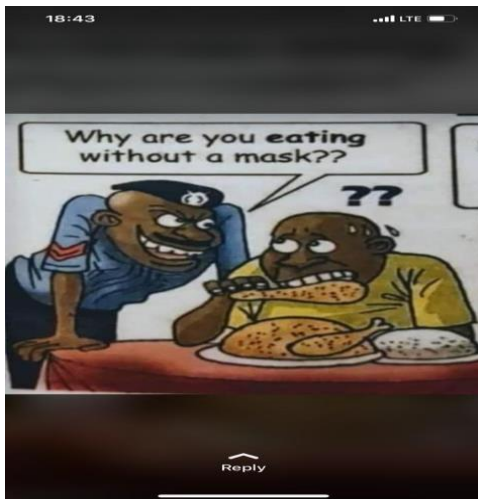
Described as memes, the data sets for the study are presented in this section. Starting with jokes that have to do with the police institution, a total of 24 of such memes are presented, analysed and discussed here.



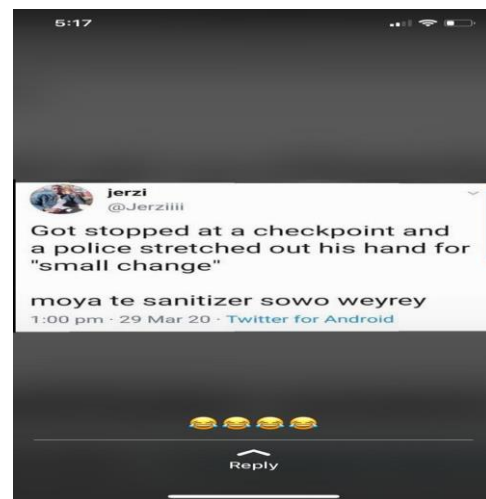
**Meme 1**



**Meme 2**



**Meme 3**



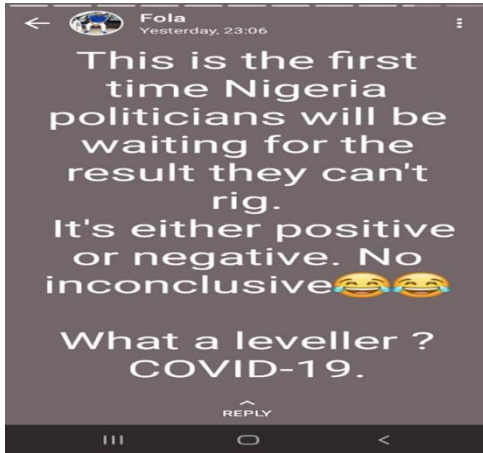
**Meme 4**

With regard to the memes above, the police are expected to live above board and discharge their duties of apprehending criminals and ensuring that people obey the law consistently and honestly. This implies that corruption among the police is supposed to be an aberration. However, corruption among law enforcement agents is endemic in much of postcolonial Africa, including Nigeria (see, for example, Nte, 2011; Oluwaniyi, 2011; Abigbova, 2015; Akinlabi, 2017). This has been attributed to a variety of factors such as poor remuneration, inadequate state supervision, failure of governance since independence as well as unwillingness on the part of the public to hold the police accountable for their misconduct (see, for example, Alemika & Chukwuma, 2003).

It is against this background that the above memes on the police can be read. Memes (1) and (2), for instance, show the policemen’s blatant disregard for COVID-19 protocols. Meme (1) is a criticism of some officers of the Nigerian Police who attempt to arrest a man for not wearing a mask, even though they themselves are not wearing any masks. Meme (2) is another criticism of the police for moving around in crowded vehicles in spite of the COVID-19 protocols as though they were immune to the virus, hence the question “Abi Corona no dey catch Nigerian Police?”. Meme (3) shows a police officer with bulging eyes staring covetously at another

man's plate of chicken and probably plotting how to dispossess him of it, hence the unwarranted question, "Why are you eating without a mask?"

Similarly, some of the memes seem to target the actions of some members of the country's political class, with corruption being identified as the bane of development.



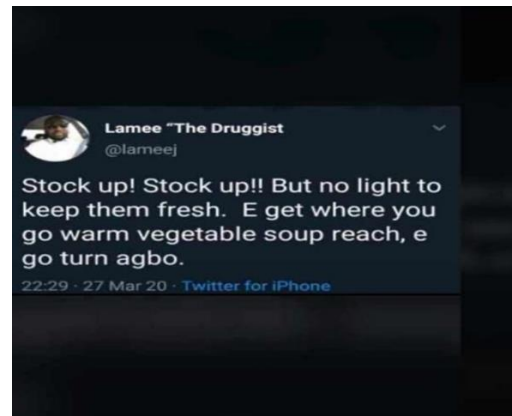
**Meme 5**



**Meme 6**



**Meme 7**



**Meme 8**

Since independence, corruption has ravaged the country and destroyed most of our cherished national values (see, for example, Osoba, 1996; Fagbadebo, 2007; Ogundiya, 2010; Abigbo, 2012; Ogbeidi, 2012). Unfortunately, the political class saddled with the responsibility of directing and managing the affairs of the nation have been the major culprits in the institutionalisation of corruption in both the public and private sectors (see, for example, Aluko, 2002; Akindele, 2005; Ogundiya, 2009; Ebegbulem, 2012; Imhonopi & Ugochukwu, 2013). Indeed, more often than not, political power has tended to fall into the hands of people whose main interest has been private, group or ethnic gain rather than the general well-being of the Nigerian state.

Thus, Meme (5) is a reference to the fact that Nigerian politicians are perceived to be corrupt and dubious, often fond of rigging elections or declaring them inconclusive once the results do not favour them (see, for example, Onah & Chukwu, 2017; Sule & Sambo, 2020). Unlike elections, however, COVID-19 test results are never inconclusive. Meme (6) highlights the

absurdity of some actions of the Federal Government during the lockdown. When examined in light of dominant belief systems, the scenario described in Meme (6) might no longer be strange. For example, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, Lagos, Ogun and Abuja had the highest number of cases, hence the need for the lockdown in those places. Ironically, instead of giving palliatives to residents of states that were locked down, money was being allegedly distributed in Katsina, the President's state.

It has been argued that there are aspects of Nigerian belief systems that encourage corruption, cronyism, nepotism, misappropriation and diversion of public funds and paying lip service to fairness, equity, justice and rule of law (Ogbeidi, 2012; Abada & Onyia, 2020). Meme (7) is a satirical picture that depicts the state of confusion of the Nigerian Government at the beginning of the lockdown. The inscrutable picture in Meme 7 is thus a way of depicting the initially uncoordinated approach by government to the pandemic, with some top government functionaries even suggesting that the virus might be a hoax.

Meme (8) is a criticism of government for not providing basic infrastructure and facilities such as good roads, potable water, primary healthcare, electricity, etc. Electricity was in short supply during the lockdown, thereby making it difficult for those who could afford to stock up on food and groceries to refrigerate and preserve their food items. Unavailability of electricity for refrigeration then made it imperative to reheat the food items over and over again. This is what prompts the Pidgin English punchline “E get where you go warm vegetable soup reach, e go turn agbo” as found in Meme 8. The Pidgin expression means that when you warm your vegetable soup over and over again, it loses its freshness and starts to taste like some kind of herbal concoction. For those familiar with the Nigerian situation, humour is created in this instance via the analogy between the ‘texture’ of excessively reheated vegetable soup and the consistency of herbal concoctions (known as ‘agbo’ in Yoruba) often promoted as capable of curing most common ailments.



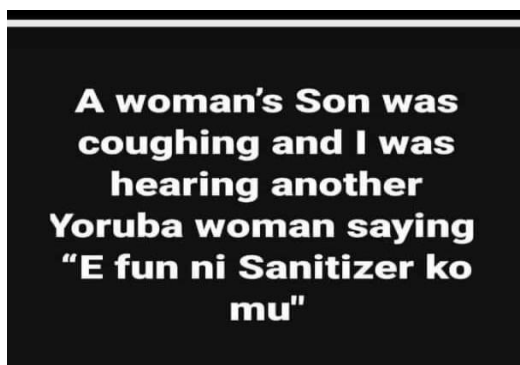
## Meme 9

Meme (9) is a political joke with a Yoruba cultural undertone. The expression “Oku olomo”, which means a dead parent or ancestor, refers to Nigeria's former military ruler, General Sanni Abacha. On May 4, 2020, the Nigeria Federal Government had disclosed that the country had recovered over \$311 million of alleged stolen funds by the country's former military ruler (Vanguardngr.com). That amount was the third tranche of recoveries of the money found in his



accounts abroad under President Buhari’s regime alone. Abacha loot recoveries have been going on since 2002, with a total value of \$4.6bn so far recovered out of the estimated \$5bn stolen. The creator of this meme is, therefore, being sarcastic by referring to a former military ruler who looted government coffers as “Oku olomo kii sun... (A dead parent never sleeps), abiyamoo tooto (a genuine parent)... sun re ooo baba rere. (rest in peace, good father).” The recovery of the loot is also euphemistically portrayed in “Abacha sent \$312m ...” when “Naija (Nigeria) needed money for Covid-19”. The Yoruba cultural undertone of the meme is explained by fact that the Yoruba believe that ancestors have enormous powers to watch over their descendants. They believe that the love that existed between a parent and a child here on earth should continue even after death. And since the parent has only ascended to another plane of existence, it should be possible for the link to remain strong.

Some of the memes create humour of an ethnic nature, as indicated by the ones highlighted below.



**Meme 10**



**Meme 11**

In Meme 10 it is more likely the case that humour is created here via sarcasm, as the other woman who says in Meme (10), “E fun ni sanitizer ko mu”, meaning “Give him some sanitizer to drink,” is more likely trying to crack a joke in the given context. This reading is far more likely given the facts that coughing is one of the more common symptoms of COVID-19 and that hand sanitisers have been promoted widely as a remedy against picking up the virus by hand. However, it is also possible that the woman, probably a Yoruba woman given her medium of expression, was speaking out of ignorance in assuming that it is safe to ingest sanitisers orally. In that case, the punch line would have come in the form of the shock value of the ignorant woman’s recommendation.

In that latter reading, then, there is a semblance between Meme 10 and Meme (11), which has to do with a controversial suggestion by the United States of America’s 45th president, Mr. Donald Trump, who on April 23, 2020 had been quoted as suggesting that people could kill the virus by injecting themselves with bleach and disinfectant. This ill-advised statement had caused widespread furore (see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52407177>).



**Meme 12**

**Meme 13**

As may already be clear, the memes in this section seem to have to do with the Yoruba of southwest Nigeria. In Lagos, one of Nigeria's states that are dominated by the Yoruba, there is a common perception that the people have a 'party culture', popularly called "Owanbe". Such parties often involve elaborate preparations and the specific occasion could be a house-warming, wedding, burial, christening or a graduation party, etc. However, in line with lockdown protocols, such parties have been rare. Thus, apart from highlighting this fact, Meme (12) also has an emoji that reflects surprise and another one that indicates laughter at the current situation. From a pragmatic perspective, Meme 12 would be understood as containing a major assumption, which is that the Yoruba supposedly thrive on throwing and attending parties. Thus, anybody who lacks this background knowledge might not be able to 'process' the humour in the text of Meme 12 beyond the phonologically tenored "I cannot bilivit!!!!", as well as the two emojis beneath the upper text—one appearing to express surprise/wonder while the other indicates intense hilarity.

Meme 13 also draws from the theme of 'party culture', being a reference to Nigerians' creativity when choosing colour schemes for their occasions. What this meme suggests is the extent to which the pandemic and its aftermath have been integrated into Nigerian culture. In this instance it is being suggested that Nigerians might want to, perhaps, 'memorialise' the pandemic by inscribing it into colour naming in relation to party wear. It has been a common Nigerian practice to name colours in terms of the closest resemblance to a well-known object in Nigerian culture. As such, instead of saying 'yellow and blush', for instance, which are acceptable names for combined colours, people might more commonly mention colour names such as 'cockroach brown', 'Jollof orange', 'tomato red', 'champagne gold', 'golden morn yellow', etc. Given this popular trend, Nigerian text consumers should more easily relate to colour terms such as 'quarantine green', 'isolated yellow', 'pandemic purple', 'covid blue', 'indoor white', 'shutdown blue', 'sanitizer white' and 'mask peach'. While there might seem to be no clear method to this naming, it is possible to connect, for instance, the 'green' in 'quarantine green' to the herbal preparations that some infected people had resorted to while in quarantine; similarly, the 'indoor' in 'indoor white' might be suggestive of the traditional wall colour of hospital wards, even as the 'blue' in 'covid blue' or 'shutdown blue' might be hinting of the depressive state into which the coronavirus and the shutdown forced some people. Whichever way one views the situation, it is clear that Meme 13 is another clear indication of how Nigerians drew humour from a disturbing situation.



### Meme 14

Meme 14 is a picture of a slight-framed man surrounded by three heavysset women. The picture has the caption “If this man die today, dem go say na covid-19 kill am o.” (That is, “If this man dies now, people will assume he died of the corona virus disease.”) Perhaps until the early ‘90s in Africa, it used to be assumed that the more heavysset a southern Nigerian woman was, the more sexually desirable she was (see, for example, Oloruntoba-Oju, 2007; Akinro & Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019). Given such ‘folk’ understanding of a woman’s body under the male ‘gaze’, the man in Meme 14 would be considered to be in ‘enviable’ company, even if it ultimately took a toll on his health on account of the physical exertion it would take for him to satisfy the women, most likely sexually—wherein lies the humour in the meme. But beyond that, however, the claim that the man’s death—should it happen during the pandemic—might be tied officially to COVID-19 is a way of signalling public distrust of government’s claims on the extent of COVID-19 fatalities.



### Meme 15



### Meme 16

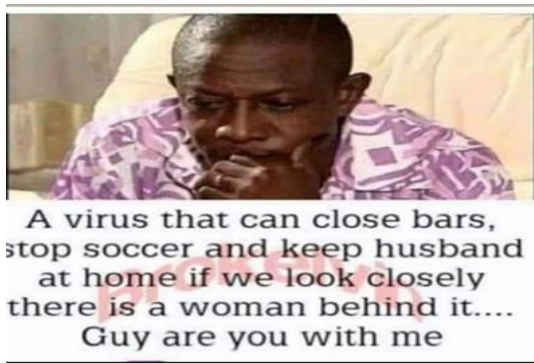
Meme 15 features the paramount ruler of Ile-Ife, the Ooni of Ife, while Meme 16 features the paramount ruler of Oyo, the Alaafin of Oyo. (While Ile-Ife is in the present-day Osun State, Oyo is in the present-day Oyo State, both in Nigeria’s southwest.) In Yoruba culture, kings are highly regarded. They are seen as God’s representatives on earth and treated like deities. In Yorubaland, the king is seen as a powerful spirit who cannot be looked eyeball-to-eyeball by

his subjects. Ironically, however, as powerful as kings are believed to be, they are still human and susceptible to infections like everyone else. As such, the fact that they have to wear face masks in public shows they are mortal and not invincible. The caption on Meme 15 says, “Even Oonirisa, the custodian of the 400 Yoruba gods, awon gan wo mask.” (Even the king, the custodian of the 400 Yoruba gods is wearing a mask). It would, however, be a matter of conjecture whether people who see this meme will consider it as humour or a warning.

There were also memes depicting man-woman relations. For example, the wording of Meme 17 is as follows:

**My friend came home from work,  
cleaned himself and sat for dinner.  
After the first bite he scolded his wife  
that food was tasteless. His wife got up,  
called the COVID hotline and told them  
that her husband doesn't have the sense  
of taste any more. National ambulance  
came and took him away and now he is  
in 14 days quarantine...  
\*This is a warning to all men who find their  
wife's cooking tasteless\*** 😞😞😞😞😞😞😞😞.

**Meme 17**



**Meme 18**



**Meme 19**

Jokes are sometimes used to portray one gender's perception of the other gender. Such jokes are usually based on stereotypes which help to maintain social and symbolic order. Because of the patriarchal nature of many African societies, women are more stereotyped in jokes than men (see Ademola-Adeoye & Adedara, 2019). Women are often portrayed as materialistic and inscrutable, troublesome, deceptive, domineering, irrational, fickle-minded and a hindrance to man whether in marriage or outside of it. Even when positive things are ascribed to women, these things reflect a phallogocentric perspective in which female actions are expected to revolve around a man. There are many Nigerian jokes that portray women as mean, vindictive,

calculating, cunny, pretentious and a killjoy. In that regard, Meme 17 plays on the word “tasteless” as used by a man to criticise his wife’s culinary skills. The wife deliberately misinterprets the same word as meaning loss of the sense of taste in order to get back at her husband. Since loss of this sense is one of the classic symptoms of the COVID-19, the husband, it is claimed, is promptly whisked off to be quarantined for fourteen days at an isolation centre.

In Meme 19, the pun is on the word “hot” as used by the husband to express his desire for sexual intimacy on the night in question. However, his wife, probably not in the mood, pretends to interpret “hot” in this case as a reference to high body temperature, which is another symptom of COVID-19. Meme 18 portrays women as killjoys who would not want their husbands to enjoy themselves at bars or watch a game of soccer, as these deny them of their husbands’ attention. It is, therefore, assumed that any disease that successfully prevents men from going to bars and watching soccer must have been invented by a woman.



**Meme 20**



**Meme 21**

Memes (20) and (21) are based on the assumption that men cheat on their wives and often lie about their whereabouts. Nigerian men are generally presented as unfaithful and promiscuous in relationships, hence the sarcasm in Meme 20: “...a married man who has never cheated on his wife” most likely does not exist! Meme 21 celebrates the fact that for the first time in history something has made it possible for every woman to know where her husband is for an extended period of time, since everyone has been forced to stay at home because of the pandemic.

Finally, some of the memes focus on religious institutions, especially the church (see Memes 22-24).



**Meme 22**



**Meme 23**



**Meme 24**

Religious jokes are used to mock the practices of the devotees of a particular religion. Many Christian denominations in Nigeria discourage alcohol consumption by their members. However, as part of the efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19, the government made it mandatory for all churches to provide alcohol-based hand sanitisers, hence the joke in Meme 22: “A fi igba ti ogogoro ra pala wo sosh,” meaning “Alcohol has finally crept into the church.” The jokes in Memes (22), (23) and (24) generally mock the religiosity of the average Nigerian. In Nigeria, there is hardly a well-known denomination or ministry that is not linked with the performance of miracles. Many Nigerians believe that every misfortune comes from magical attack, witches, wizards or other demonic powers in their environment. Many Nigerians have a religio-cultural mindset that encourages the desire for miracles to cure diseases and resolve other distressing situations. However, a number of Nigerians are sceptical about the authenticity of some of the miracles, as indicated by the text of some of the memes. Meme 23, which says “I never see any Naija pastor go isolation centre heal anybody from covid ...,” is a reflection of such scepticism. Meme 24 seems to suggest that many pastors are fond of deceiving their members into thinking that all their health, financial, career, business and relationship problems are orchestrated by some “household” witches and wizards who appeared to have been deactivated during the lockdown but could be reactivated by some pastors, following the reopening of churches to worshippers.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Much comedy is based on something going wrong and the line between something being comic or tragic, and between that which makes us laugh or cry, is highly fluid. Comedians typically extract humour out of minor everyday situations that most people recognise, while utilising puns and ambiguities of different types that communicate things in a manner a little different from what is expected. The COVID-19 situation has become the “new normal”, so it is not surprising that it is being subjected to humour. One of the discursive functions of jokes is to amuse people and make them relax even in tense situations. In this particular case, a community of humour has been created by people experiencing a pandemic; when we laugh at the same thing, we affirm each other in a shared experience of the situation.

Thus, this study has examined purposively selected Nigerian COVID-19 jokes and memes as shared mainly on WhatsApp. These jokes reflect various facets of life and living conditions in contemporary Nigeria. The study found a general preponderance of the use of Nigerian English (the variety of English used in the Nigerian sociolinguistic situation), Nigerian Pidgin and code-switching, thus reflecting the influence of the country’s linguistic diversity while serving as a marker of ethnic/regional identity. The circulation of these jokes has been facilitated by the internet and mobile telephony, which have, in turn, seen to the expansion of the public space. Even in the midst of the pervasive gloom, the zest of Nigerians for life remains profound and this seemingly unshakeable vivacity is noted in the people's capacity for humour and laughter. Humour might be a ‘coping mechanism’, a ‘means of escape,’ a ‘subversion’ or a means of ‘resistance’.

## 7.0 References

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