

The *áwàdà* phenomenon: Exploring humour in Wole Soyinka's *Alápatà Apátà*

Elijah Adeoluwa Olusegun

Department of English, University of Lagos, Akoka
adelus05@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the deployment of humour in Wole Soyinka's new and full-length play Alápatà Apátà. The emergence of Moses Olaiya (otherwise known as Baba Sala) on the Nigerian theatre scene at a time it was dominated by such colossuses as Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, and Kola Ogunmola, as a popular jester and comic actor has elevated the phenomenon called áwàdà to a popular form of art. The idea of serious theatre involving mostly tragedy had dominated the Nigerian theatrical scene to an extent that little attention is devoted to the less popular form of comedy until it was given impetus by the dexterity of Moses Olaiya. In the dramatic literary circle, Wole Soyinka bestrides the Nigerian space with his biting and humorous satire in such plays as The Lion and the Jewel, The Jero Plays, Childe International amongst others. With a great mastery of satire and humour, in his most recent play Alápatà Apátà, we witnessed a reincarnation of Moses Olaiya. However, Soyinka does not focus only on the character of Moses Olaiya (whom he dedicates the play to), he explores the misapplication of Yoruba language's accent resulting in semantic oddity. The incongruity that can arise from the misunderstanding of language and its nuances is brought to the fore in our understanding of the theoretical exploration of the phenomenon called áwàdà. This article thus situates Wole Soyinka's Alápatà Apátà within the literary and theatrical explication of humour in the Nigerian context showing that 'that which is comic' resonates as a universal human phenomenon irrespective of language.

Keywords: Áwàdà, humour, satire, Nigerian drama, Moses Olaiya.

1. Introduction

One of the intriguing aspects of human condition is encoded in the subtle enquiry; why do we laugh? This question raises and prompts a search into the theoretical positions that may have emerged on the many reasons why we laugh, thus leading to postulations from numerous theorists on the nature of comedy and humour. How is it possible that when confronted by the oddities of life, our reactions when least expected is subtle laughter? Studies on humour have had a long history, especially with its changing meanings over time. What does humour consist of? How do we recognise humour? As far as we know, there has not been many

theories on humour from a philosophical and literary perspective as we know it in Nigeria. Humour and comedy are studied in most human sciences or humanities' disciplines. Many approaches to humour studies have focused on the cognitive behavioural paradigms that produced humour. Psychologists look out for the mental processes involved in the production and reception of humour. Sociologists look at the social processes and relational cues within which humour occurs. Linguists, semioticians, and discourse analysts examine the use of language (especially verbal signals) that generate humorous situations.

There is no general agreement as to what humour is, although most people are convinced they know it when they see it. As a human phenomenon, what constitutes the structure and/or the nature of humour is mostly identifiable rather than describable. That is, in most theories that have been used to explore humour such as incongruity, superiority, relief theories, and so on, it is easier to identify humour in certain situations than describe it. This accounts for why it is studied in various humanistic disciplines including literature. Humour is manifest in situations, characters, language, or a combination of these factors to varying degrees. We will consider such instances as a misuse of accent in relation to the meaning component of the Yoruba language, and characters' misinterpretation of situations as typical of incongruity (strangeness) in humour studies.

Moreover, the significance of culture (as encoded language) is critical to the comprehension of humour. Humour is a cultural affair situated in the culture that produces it. It is in this light that this article examines humour as a human phenomenon in Wole Soyinka's *Alápatà Apátà*. The symbiotic relationship between the contexts, situations, and the participants in a humorous representation is brought to the fore through Soyinka's re-creation of a comic figure in Nigeria's popular theatre, Moses Olaiya.

2. Humour as a human phenomenon

Most of our theoretical knowledge of humour is derived from Western scholars who have attempted to establish and differentiate cogently the ideological and semantic differences between comedy, humour, hilarity, wit, joke, jest, folly and so on. An attempt to properly codify what humour means in contemporary time led to an international conference on Humour in Cardiff in 1976. The discussions that emanated mostly from a psychological perspective on humour have explored various dimensions of humour. Chapman and Foot (1977) thus opened for discussion theoretical approaches to the study of humour as a human phenomenon within the psychological, psychoanalytical, linguistic, sociological, anthropological and other related fields. Michael Billig (2005) provides a historical overview of the various theories on humour ranging from Aristotle, Hobbes, Freud, and Bergson. Such theoretical postulations on humour as Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief/Release theories are all critically evaluated. Jerry Palmer (1994) tries to broadly classify all the terminologies associated with comedy as emanating from a cultural perception to humour. Palmer uses *humour* as an umbrella term that covers a wide spectrum of what Western philosophies differentiate from tragedy that are not wholly comedy as a distinct genre but could be regarded as sub-strata of comedy. Palmer traces the history of comedy and its link to clowns, religion, and court jesters from Ancient Greece to the Roman Empires, Medieval Europe, and through to the modern civilisation. Palmer notes that humour is a challenge for different theoretical approaches, as

it is multidimensional, it is part of personality and part of our cognitive and emotional process. It is subject to social rules governing appropriate behaviour, on different occasions. It is part of literary and audio-visual narrative; it is subject to moral and aesthetic judgement, and it is rhetorical instrument.

(Palmer 1994: ii.)

Palmer's approach is an investigation of the universal properties of humour as a human phenomenon subject to diverse contexts and relationships. He succinctly elaborates on the functions of humour from the perspectives of psychology (on Freud's perspective on humour, see Palmer 1994: 79) sociology (social significance), and biology [gender] (Palmer 1994: 68). Theoretically, Palmer identifies both the functionalist theory of humour and the relativist theory. Accordingly, humour is recognised on several grounds which include conventional signs, the relationship between context and transgression as well as the pleasure associated with a particular semiotic mechanism that is culturally dominant (Palmer 1994: 15-17, 57-60). Consequently, he opines that the function of humour is not clear until the parameter of the relationship is defined. As to function, Palmer argues that humour maintains the group identity of being human through its rhetorical, social, interactional, and didactic functions. He agrees with Ekman's (1981) position on the functionality of humour. According to Ekman (1981: 8-12, quoted in Palmer 1994: 58), "humour serves this function through the creation and preservation of group identity: because joking is a rule-bound activity, it has the characteristics of ritual, the common acceptance of which is a means of forming group identity".

Modern answers concerning the place of humour in the society have often seen humour as part of our species' adaptation to its environment in the social arrangements that humour sustains. The English language has developed sufficiently to create various terminologies for understanding the context and structure of varying kinds of comedy such as farce, jest, wit, absurdity as they evince laughter or subtle humour. The plethora of coinages that explain and differentiate the various terminologies only leave someone who is not culturally inclined to the nuances of the English language to miss the salient ideas behind humour. In the same vein, the cultural relativity of humour and language shows that the cultural elements, structure, and relationship factors that generate humour differ from culture to culture. Humour belongs to the mix of cultural referents that we use to contextualise art forms. That is, the art of humour is sometimes context-dependent for its meaning to be clear. Most of these theories on humour, therefore, it has to be said, are mixed in the sense that while humour is a human phenomenon, it cannot be adequately captured in a single integrated form.

For the purposes of this essay, I propose to raise the following arguments: Is comedy the same as humour? Do jokes and laughter elicit the same response all the time? Who and what is involved in what we can reasonably call *humorous*? How has the psychological and sociological dimension/function of humour, especially as depicted in Soyinka's (2015) play, been appropriated within the Nigerian context? And lastly, what does humour consist of? From a Nigerian standpoint, I have situated my argument in a terminology which I find to encompass this object of discourse – *Áwàdà*. The theoretical concepts of humour has mostly been Western in their origins; the practice, however, is culturally relative and different. The humaneness of humour is expressed in music, songs, arts, theatre, and the culture of derision to correct and express laughter at the folly of humans. The motive of humour is the discovery of the 'not-so-serious' in human nature by means of observation, while the audience is the sympathetic individuals who find such folly a part of themselves. There is a blend of satire in humour to show that the literary artist is not only interested in evoking laughter at the object of derision but also to point out the foolishness of man's actions. Humour grabs the attention of the perceptive audience, diverting them from the subtle messages of the artist. Humour is an art in which the perceptive writer must be fully aware of its implications on the reader. In many instances, incongruity as a theory (or form) of humour often shows contradictions in acceptable behaviours and emphasises irony and surprise. It emanates from an awareness of the disparity between what is said and what happens. The audience on its part must be keenly conscious of the relationship between art and humour so as not to lose the broadness of humour. And as Reaves (2001: 4) notes, "the multi-layered enigma (the artist) probes human

nature, our perceptions of ourselves, and the role of the artist". Through the sociological and psychological dimension of humour, we come to understand the artist's perception of the skewed nature of human follies. In this regard, the human being is the only being with a sense of humour.

3. Conceptualising *áwàdà*

Áwàdà (literally translated as *joke*) is a Yoruba language term broad enough to convey a sense of humour as we know it in English. *Áwàdà* means a popular jest in which the participants involved are not expected to take offence. Yoruba language is predominantly spoken in South-West Nigeria, some parts of West Africa such as Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, and in such places as Jamaica, Brazil, etc. The expression connotes a sense of the unserious, joke situations, trickery, and folly. It often comes to mean an artist whose prerogative is the jest while being an unacknowledged sage. *Áwàdà* may connote lack of seriousness but it also has rudiments of sage wisdom in its deployment. This argument may suffer from a narrow conception, however, of what humour (and the different shades of comedy such as jest, joke, farce, comic, satire etc.) may mean in English, and what *áwàdà* means in Yoruba language. Humour is the quality of being amusing or comic especially as expressed in literature. And as Ross (1990: 1) points out, humour is said to be "something that makes a person laugh or smile" (quoted in Adeleke 2005: 45). However, for this paper, I will assume that the term *humour* can cover the various shades of what *áwàdà* may mean in Yoruba language. It encompasses not just literary or conversational discourse but also other aspects such as the demeanour of the participants, modes of dressing, speech patterns, and every design which may elicit either subtle or farcical laughter in the audience. Furthermore, the term *Áláwàdà* is someone known or is believed to be a trickster, a humourist, a jester, a comedian, a performer, an entertainer, an artist and so on almost at the same time. While some of the terms as adopted in English may denote negativity, *áwàdà* is predominantly used in a positive sense. In fact, the major conception of the term *áwàdà* will mean more than what the different terminologies in English can suggest. *Áwàdà* then is the theatrics of putting up a show whereby the audience and the performer may or may not be aware of the situation of the joke. Adeleke (2005: 44-45) identifies three basic elements that are germane to jokes, humour, and laughter: the teller, the victim and the audience. *Áwàdà* oftentimes creates an atmosphere of willing suspension of disbelief as the audience allow the performer to have a field day in the knowledge that he is acting out the basic human desire for psychological and emotional release within a social ambience. *Áwàdà* is said to occur when the actions of the participants (teller, victim, and audience) are interpreted within the situational assumptions of the moral, cultural, and social circumstances that they share. The victim "may be an individual, an institution or a set of beliefs" while the audience lends support to the humourist by guffawing (Adeleke 2005: 45). In the interactions with *Áláwàdà*, the spectators understand the occasion, the situation does not call for serious bashing, rather a subconscious reflection on the social, political, and cultural misnomers the artist draws attention to.

Áwàdà in the Nigerian context significantly serves as a veritable source of facts/truth in situations where it is difficult to speak the truth gravely. Very serious situations are rendered in a jocular manner in order to minimise frictions. For example, the sociocultural awareness of truth-telling in joke situations is couched in the proverb: *idi áwàdà ni a ti'n mo otito* 'it is from jokes that we derive the facts/truth'. Through subtle reference, and the presuppositions among the participants, the *Áláwàdà* can aim a dig at the folly of anyone including those in authority. Though the mutual understanding of the referents and occasions may elicit laughter, the participants usually realise the truth in humorous situations for their own edification.

From joke situations truth emanates in such profundity that it stuns the participants upon careful reflections. The foregoing is in alignment with Obadare's (2009: 248-249) claim that humour and joke situations function in their potency as a social technique and have the capacity to disrupt a social order especially where governmental institutions are the butts of peculiar jokes. Humour is used to ridicule inefficient government parastatals and officials who neglect their essential roles. The art of humour and the message of the artist, therefore, work on the sub-consciousness of the audience.

The disambiguation of the word *áwàdà* is thus imperative to understanding its importance in the critical evaluation of the discursive traits in Wole Soyinka's *Alápatà Apátà* (2015). A master feature of the Yoruba language, accent in this case (spoken and written), can go to a great length to influence our reasoning and understanding of what the cultural nuances of the language mean to native speakers in ways foreigners may find ambiguous. The misapplication of this accent, in the hands of a great humourist like Moses Olaiya makes for a critical discourse on the nature and structure of humour. In the same vein, Wole Soyinka is able to explore this misapplication of accent to create a drama text that is riddled with humour which derives from the misunderstanding of the accentual features of the language. Language's peculiarities are reflective of the culture in which they exist. The use of language in different circumstances – social, religious, politics, indicates the different level to which verbal (and non-verbal) expressions can carry humorous meanings. Humour, as indicated by scholars, relies on ambiguity, irony, and in general confusion. As well as encouraging social bonding among participants, *áwàdà* maintains the moral implications of sustaining the culture that gives birth to it. In the same way that it allows for psychological relief/pleasure, *áwàdà* thus fits all the theoretical paradigms identified. Spoken Yoruba language is realised with tonal inflections – high, low, and mid tones – on vowels. Because the language is tonal in nature, idiophones and homophones are usually a source of confusion, especially to those who have not mastered the intricacies of the tonal counterpoints in the language. These intricacies can be a general source of humour especially when in contact with English language.

4. Moses Olaiya: The emergence of *Álówàdà*

Moses Olaiya Adejumo (b. 1936) is better known by his stage name *Baba Sala* (Haynes 1994: 17; 1995: 100, 107). He was the most famous comedian and one of the most highly regarded dramatists in Nigeria from the 1960s to the early 1990s. He is often regarded as the father of Nigeria's comedy, moving from the stage, which he joined in 1960, to the television and later to cinema and video film (Julius-Adeoye 2013: 40). Olaiya's influence is still being felt among the number of comedians who have taken the mantle he left on the Nigerian stage. *Baba Sala* was prominent and famous for his comic acts while Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, and Duro Ladipo were performing highbrow theatres that focused on the heroic deeds and tragic circumstances of their characters.

The contemporary Nigerian theatre emerged from the traditional travelling theatre troupes of Ogunde, Ladipo, and Olaiya as they crisscrossed the length and breadth of the country performing their plays (both tragedies and comedies). The specific genre of their performances was sustained by the troupes that accompany each of them in performing tragic or comic plays. These theatre practitioners organised travelling troupes that reflected their distinct orientations to theatre practice. They combined a brilliant sense of mime, traditional drumming, music and folklore, and colourful costumes in delivering theatrical performances. Their themes ranged from modern day satire to historical tragedy. The 'seriousness' of Ogunde and Ladipo's plays revealed that they enjoyed patronage more than the less serious

plays of Baba Sala. Thus, Ogunmola, Ladipo, and Ogunde were well known as they were able to attract huge crowd to their plays whenever they performed. This disparity reinforced the argument and assumptions that comedy and, more significantly, humour is inferior to the noble genre of tragedy and the heroics of Ogunde's and Ogunmola's plays. As a departure from the 'serious' theatre of Ogunde and Ladipo, Olaiya's theatre troupe clearly had the objective of evoking laughter and mirth wherever they perform. Their troupe's motto being *Áwàdà K'rik'ri* (unending laughter). Their appearances border on oddity when compared to the serious art of theatre that Ogunde and Ladipo practice. Through consistent shows of humorous display and insightful commentary on human nature and its follies, Olaiya began to popularise the comic art. Moses Olaiya's approach to the theatre has been one that thrives on the seeming incongruous nature of his manner, speech, and appearance on stage. Some of the notable plays of Olaiya include *Mosebolatan*, *Aare Agbaye*, *Tokunbo*, *Agba Man*, *Return Match*, *Owo Lagba*, *Omo Oloku* and several others (Haynes 1995: 107-111). Olaiya's plays differ from the Ogunde's and Ladipo's more serious plays; nevertheless, they deal satirically with social issues in a farcical manner that employs slapstick humour to the admiration and pleasure of his audience.

Karin Barber (2004: 373) notes that Baba Sala is a "stage comedian very popular with audiences for his subversive and ambiguous lampoons of authority and respectability". While describing Moses Olaiya's theatrical style and its emergence, L.O Bamidele (quoted in Julius-Adeoye 2013: 40) declares that Olaiya's objective is

to arouse laughter and excite interest in the people he started with the idea of *incongruity* on the stage for comic effect. He started with the idea of *mechanical encrustation* upon the living; he started with the *language of comedy* that tends to the *aesthetic of the jokes*; he started what one might call being outlandish with pillow-stuffed belly and *playful tricks*; he started *clownish display* bordering on childish display of intrigues and *jack-in-the-box pranks* (my emphasis).

The highlighted expressions show the vast world to which the phenomenon called *áwàdà* is flexible enough to accommodate. While some of these terms take on negative circumstances often bordering on folly and stupidity, other aspects border on the well-established positive paradigm to which the audience now accord Olaiya in his comic role play. According to Dapo Adelugba as quoted by Bamidele (see Julius-Adeoye 2013: 42), Olaiya refrained from profane or vulgar language in his plays, and this led him to posit that "his speeches have vigour and vivacity whether he is using Yoruba language or the ungrammatical structure of the English language. They become more vibrant for explosive laugh in their ungrammatical state" (quoted in Julius-Adeoye 2013: 42).

Moses Olaiya's influence on such comedians as Sunday Omobolanle (Aluwe), Ayo Ogunsina (Papilolo), and Kayode Olaiya (Aderupoko) led to the proliferation of the comic genre in Nigerian theatre especially in the Southwestern part of the country. This group of comedians are credited with leading the advancement of comedy in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Their plays owe much to the pioneering effort of Moses Olaiya who showed tremendous dexterity in the 'unserious' business of comedy. His costumes, appearance, his use of grammatically incoherent English interspersed with Yoruba translations all contribute to the comic and humorous aspects of Baba Sala's persona. His audience, who are largely Yorubas, find the incongruity of his appearance and mannerisms amusing. It is imperative to note that with the setting up of the first television station in Ibadan, Baba Sala moved from travelling theatre to the screen, and subsequently to film. He thus had an edge in bringing his comedies to the screen in order to reach a wider audience than his travelling troupe could have done. As Karin Barber noted (quoted in Haynes 1995:100), television also "was a catalyst in the process of shedding the older operatic format and replacing it with a streamlined tightly articulated comedy style carried almost entirely by straight dialogue". At

the tail end of the century, another set of actors emerged including Babatunde Omidina (Baba Suwe), Bolaji Amusan (Mr Latin), Dele Odudu, Omoladun Omidina (Omoladun Kenkelewu), Binta Ayo Mogaji among others. The distinguishing traits of these artists as derived from Moses Olaiya's theatre are their seeming lack of change in costumes, appearance, stage names that are comical, incongruous language use such as code-mixing, code-switching, and deliberate twist of English grammar, and apparent oddities that confront the audience whenever they perform. As varied as they are in their role-plays, not all these actors are in the strict sense comedians in all instances. Though they play comic roles, they are quite different from established comedians as Moses Olaiya, Aluwe, Papilolo and so on. This suggests that it is not in all instances that we have comedians as *Àlávání*; even though professionals exist, within certain relationship and occasions individuals sometimes take on the role of *Àlávání*. The occasion, situation and participants are therefore the determining factors for the existence of *ávání*.

Babatunde Omidina, for instance, dresses in such a manner that seems incongruous with the weather situation depicted in his plays (he takes this from Moses Olaiya). Regardless of the weather situation, for example, he covers himself in multi-layered clothing befitting a winter costume that makes him ridiculous, while at the same time blackening his face. The humorous theatricals of these actors give a sense of the abnormal, revealing contravention of social norms by deliberately construed mischiefs. Olaiya's influence is also noticed in the transformation of comedy into stand-up situations-comedies. Performers revelling in the incongruity of performing before a live audience through contours that smirk of absurdity and incongruities. Contemporary comedians, however, no longer rely on costumes but on the meaning potential of their discourse with their audience. Significantly, from Baba Sala's theatre to all those that are influenced by him, they have focused on public performance and sometimes improvisation of their art. Although Baba Sala and many others identified are comic actors, their style is not different from those articulated by Mintz (1985: 79) on the styles of stand-up comedians: "The styles of stand-up comedy differ almost as much as the content of jokes and joke routines themselves, but the essence of the art is creative distortion. Such distortion is achieved through exaggeration, stylization, incongruous context, and burlesque". This approach shows that the artists/comedians work without any prepared text; rather they thrive on the shared knowledge of certain situations with their audience, especially social and political criticisms. The illogicality and incongruity noticed in the various performances are reflections of their persona in their desire to be an *Àlávání* albeit maintaining that they are not. In other words, when characters around them comment on the incongruity in their speech or manners, their rebuff is met with laughter because they reveal more than stupidity at their inattentions. In essence, "these and other techniques all disrupt expectation and re-order it plausibly but differently from its original state" (Mintz 1985: 79).

5. The literary artist with a script: Wole Soyinka

Literature has had a long history of comedy that thrives on satire and humour. Though it focuses on less serious issues, comedy has not shied away from presenting the illogicality in human demeanours as well as revealing the folly of human nature. Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) is a foremost Nigerian playwright, poet, and human right activist. Soyinka writes of modern West Africa in a satirical style, but his serious intent and his belief in the evils inherent in the exercise of power usually is evident in his works (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018). Without any doubt, Wole Soyinka remains Nigeria's most versatile and enduring dramatist, standing above others not only in his prolificacy but sometimes also in his depth of vision and perception (Ogunbiyi 1981: 32). It is worth noting that the sheer number of critical works on

Soyinka's literary output now make for a scholarship in Nigerian literature. Soyinka's literary oeuvre cuts across genres: tragedies, comedies, tragi-comedies, poetry, and prose-fiction. The range, variety and vitality of his writings is reflected in most of his more serious plays. His prolificacy shows in the profoundness of his works through his understanding of the socio-political landscape in which he writes. Soyinka's perception of the imbalance in the social, political, and religious machinations of his environment all contribute to the satirical stance he pursues in his comedies.

Biodun Jeyifo (1984: 143), a renowned critic of Soyinka's works, avers that

the directness, wit, satire and ebullient spirit of some of Soyinka's plays which capture the eccentricities, absurdities, prejudices and follies of much of our social life make them ready, accessible fares if the institutional base of their popular projection can be found and sustained.

Furthermore, Soyinka's comic plays like *The Lion and the Jewel* (1957) *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960), *A Requiem for a Futurologist* (1985), *Childe International* (1987), *From Zia with Love* (1992), and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995) gained in popularity and widespread appeal because they juxtapose attempts by Nigerians to glorify everything foreign as well as their disdain towards indigenous culture. Soyinka's *Requiem to a Futurologist* owes much to the influence of Moses Olaiya as he adopts stage farce as provocative witnessing to the *penkelemesi* 'peculiar mess' of an unbridled avarice of the trickster. Soyinka pokes fun at those characters who accept western ideas and modernity without really understanding them. An uncritical craving for foreign customs, manners, dressings, appearances, and language readily make for a humorous or caricature depictions by a skilful writer as Wole Soyinka, as the examples in Sections 6.1 and 6.2 below will clearly illustrate.

With a great mastery of the technique of the stage, language and intricate plotting, Soyinka is able to combine all those elements that make for oddity and incongruity as seen in the comic characters of his plays. Through the comedies, Soyinka strips away the masks and expose his characters for what they really are, revealing their inherent folly, portraying them as selfish, hypocritical, irrational and capable of self-delusion. Confused identities, wordplay, and verbal nonsense all add to the general confusion in most of the plays. From the perspective of the playwright, Soyinka derides most of the characters who feel that by displaying their exposure to foreign/European languages and customs are better than those who are not. Their over-bloated wisdom is rendered the object of laughter, scorn, and humour. However, in *Alápatà Apátà* (2015), Soyinka recognises the creative genius of Moses Olaiya's *Álávàdà* pattern according to which the misunderstanding of the other characters around him becomes the object of humour rather than the character himself who seems comical. Wole Soyinka in the preface to *Alápatà Apátà* states that he hopes he has been able to write a play (or a script) worthy of Baba Sala's achievement as an *Álávàdà*:

Easily one of the greatest comic geniuses that the Nigerian stage has ever produced is Moses Olaiya, more popularly known as *Álávàdà*. ... Moses Olaiya's metier was broad, socially disruptive, Falstaffian... I always dreamt of providing him with sketches to stretch his technique to the limit.

(Soyinka 2015: xi.)

While Baba Sala's theatre is solely based on humorous performances, Soyinka creates a dramatic text that can be performed repeatedly to demonstrate the enduring power of literature. Soyinka, the literary artist, here recreates another character known to the Nigerian stage who acts as the sage and whose personality, words, action, creativity, and ingenuity are genuinely misconstrued. All of these generate incongruous situations that clearly become humorous. The atmosphere in which Baba Sala's theatre operates shows clearly an artist who

is well aware of the incongruous and often times ridiculous environment he performs. As Jonathan Haynes opines (1995: 107): “Baba Sala’s personality and excellent acting are at the centre of things, but are set in a rich, various and well-structured comic world”. Wole Soyinka through this play thus bridges the nexus between the theatre practitioner (Baba Sala) who looms large on the Nigerian comic scene, and the literary artist with a script that ensures the *Áwàdà* (culturally Nigerian) will feature amongst literature on humour. Soyinka uses the text to construct a popular *Áláwàdà* and thus immortalises the art of Baba Sala. In the same manner, Soyinka through the play explores the abhorrent disregard for other people’s language and its cultural distinctness especially when people ignore the damage done to a language by ignoring such features as sound and meaning interface. The exploration of humour in this play supports the relativist theoretical perspective to humour as culturally inclined.

6. Humour in *Alápatà Apátà*

6.1. Alaba the *Áláwàdà*

Alápatà Apátà,¹ quite unlike most of Soyinka’s comedies, has a deliberate ploy to focus on the interplay between tone and meaning in Yoruba language, its usage, its abuses, and its confusions (especially in a way not previously adopted in his earlier works). The theatrical and contextual usage of Yoruba and English languages (including Pidgin) without any apology to non-native users (by way of translations) critically exemplifies the role of language in meaning confusion. Whilst confronting language intricacies, *Alápatà Apátà* does not deviate from the political, social, cultural, and religious excesses (as thematic preoccupations) that the majority of Soyinka’s satirical plays have confronted. As earlier noted, though subtly, the grand design of *Alápatà Apátà* is to create a character whose ambience reverberates the popular *Áláwàdà* (Moses Olaiya) in Nigeria’s popular theatre. The character Alaba thus becomes the master of irreverence around which Soyinka’s project revolves in the play. Grafting serious societal concerns such as politics, religion, economics, education, and governance into the play, Soyinka downplays the seriousness of many of the socio-political, cultural, and religious issues to the comic spheres through humour. These various concerns are represented by representative characters such as Politician, Mechanic, Prospector, General, Pastor, Student, as they confront the central character, Alaba, in a rollicking manner that makes for humorous reading of the play.

Alápatà Apátà revolves around Alaba, a semi-literate but exceptionally skilled butcher who decides to retire from active service and watch the world sitting on a boulder in front of his house. His retirement from meritorious service is not welcome by different groups of people who, depending on the benefits derived from Alaba’s profession, cannot understand his ideas and reasons for early retirement. All the groups see him from the point of need to an extent that they cannot understand the concept of retirement from a successful business as butchery which they claim has brought him fame from far and wide. Alaba’s decision to retire and the manner in which he chooses to be completely idle from any work become a source of mystery and concern to all the other characters. Alaba takes the world as his stage. He sits all day on a rock to ‘see’ the world from the top and enjoy his retirement in solitude. Unfortunately, Alaba’s (in)actions and the rock he sits on everyday become a subject of interest, curiosity, even debates, about his true motives. These actions then put Alaba on a collision course with interest groups – peasants, clerics, politicians, businessmen, students, soldiers, and the overbearing Teacher who (mis)interpret Alaba’s retirement and the rock from the position of benefit to their course. Alaba’s intention to take down the signpost that

leads to his house indicating a butcher's shop ironically draws more attention to the confusion about the authentic motives for his retirement. Alaba's oddities lead to different conclusions to which he is at best ignorant.

Alápatà is the Yoruba word for a butcher. *Álapáta* also means an 'owner of a rock' and, thirdly, *Álapáta* may also mean a ruler or chief of *Apata*, a town. Significantly, all of these meaning variants are differentiated with the tone/accent in the language. All of the confusions that arise from misplacing the accent (spoken or written) on the vowels make for the humorous depictions of all the characters. Accent in Yoruba language (both in the spoken and written form of the language) provides contrasting meanings to which a person who does not speak the language may completely miss. Any misapplication of the accent results in incongruity that forms the basis of humour. Sometimes, the humour may be lost on the characters as well as the audience, if the linguistic intricacies are ignored. In the course of the play, Alaba personifies all the different variants to which the word *Apata* means. The *al-*suffix attached to words such as *apata*, *áwàdà* and so on put Alaba at the centre of the controversial image as both a serious and an 'unserious' character. Tellingly, misplacing the *akiset* (accent) results in *akisident* (accident).

Soyinka's *Alápatà Apátà*, although purely comic, does not shy away from political undertones and satires. In the play, there are references to the social events in the nation and subtle references to politicians who are known for corrupt practices. Through vague references to the political establishment, it ridicules the political elites who do nothing significant in their office except for counting the days. Alaba's conversation with Teacher at the beginning of the play, although ironic, clearly is a reference to the nation's political class, that is, the political office holders who are voted into office and who enjoy the pecks of their office, but their existence means nothing to those they purport to serve. The only thing they celebrate is the number of days spent in office:

TEACHER: (*going*) Glad to see you well and strong. *Alápatà tí n f'ran dárà!*² When I looked up and didn't see you up there, I panicked. Thirty days doing nothing can be a strain on the soul – unless of course you're actually holding national office. Then it's second nature.

(Soyinka 2015: 45.)

Whoever is familiar with the ineptitude of politicians in office will understand the vague reference to their seeming lack of initiative or moral burden of performance. Meanwhile, in opposition to Alaba, his being 'out' of office (in retirement) is more significant, as different people cannot ignore his relevance as a butcher to them. They keep pestering him to come out of retirement. The political elites are "exemplar of ... nothing". They are in politics only to gain fame, power, and money. Little wonder that the majority cannot understand why someone who is as successful as Alaba in his business will retire early:

PROSPECTOR: Even when you've piled up a decent nest egg, you don't simply retire from a profitable business, then sit on top of a rock, doing nothing.

(Soyinka 2015: 11.)

Alaba sets himself for controversy right from his days as a student in the local primary school. In his attempt to use his initiative to straighten the world (the Atlas Globe), he breaks the axis and is expelled from school because his father refuses to pay for a new one. Alaba's reasoning and logic come from the misplaced polarities of a world. The Atlas globe is standing on a thin pole (axis). The pole itself is crooked, tilting the balance of the world on one side. Alaba's insistence that the world is out of order set the tone for his wandering through life because he cannot finish his education despite his ambition to study veterinary medicine:

ALABA: ... “*Wojí ni, amókùn, ’rù orì ’ wojí’O ni – ah, à t’isàlẹ̀jì*”³ (The load on my head began to bend when I was your age.)

ALABA: Of course you wouldn’t. It means, don’t tell the man with K-legs that the load on his head is crooked. He’ll tell you that the problem did not begin up there but down from below. The load on my head began to bend when I was your age, and all because I used my initiative.

(Soyinka 2015: 20.)

Alaba considers himself to be a person of great initiative, always seeing things from a straight perspective, but unfortunately for him, every other person sees the same thing crooked. Alaba, the maverick, has a strong perception of the self. He is witty and intelligent. His intentions are quite clear in his logic of whatever situations he finds himself. Therefore, there are disparities in how he conceives some things and the way others around him conceive the same thing. He cannot shake the metaphor of his profession with everything in life; straightness, butcher’s knife dividing things in equal parts:

ALABA: ... Everything had to be straight and neat – I learnt that from my father. Pity the world didn’t learn from him, that is why it is all asikiwu. Like that atlas globe.

(Soyinka 2015: 32.)

Alaba cannot understand why people do not understand and accept his decision to retire: “I am a modest man. But it looks like people just won’t leave me alone” (115). As far as Alaba is concerned, he is fulfilled to the point where he no longer needs anyone to tell him what to do. However, the skewed nature of social expectations, of people’s opinions of him, alongside his own demeanours are major incongruent factors that depict the art of humour in the play.

6.2. Ambiguity and Irony in *Alápatà Apátà*

The confusion generated by misplacing the correct accent on *Alápatà Apátà* is the chief source of ambiguity and irony in the play. Buoyed and encouraged by Teacher, Alaba goes on a retirement plan to sit and watch the world spin by in complete idleness. To commemorate his thirty (30) days in/out of office, Teacher decides it is best if the signpost to Alaba’s house is redesigned to read:

ABA ALABA ALAPATA Rt.D. Butcher Emeritus. MAESTRO DI SUYA.⁴
Alumnus Butcherus, Queen Victoria Secondary.

(Soyinka 2015: 61.)

Unknown to Alaba, the boulder on which he sits daily has rich mineral deposits that become a source of economic interest to characters such as Prospector, Investor, Danielebo (Governor), and the retired General (who is out of retirement in search of more fortune). Significantly, while the rock becomes a source of inquiry (as per its economic prospects), Alaba’s immobility on it causes complete stupefaction to those who do not understand his motives. For such characters as Mechanic, Farmer, Cleric, and Pastor, he is a mysterious and an ambiguous character who personifies the occult which is not unconnected to his apprenticeship of *Ifa* (Art of divination). Attributing this sense of the mysterious to Alaba’s character shows their own level of superstition, and it is dramatically erroneous because the audience understands Alaba’s simplicity. Alaba narrates his sojourn as he tries different professions before settling for a butcher. He becomes successful and famous for his exploit in *suya* making. For him, “retirement means not doing what you were doing before” (78), but for others, he has a hidden agenda for sitting on a rock doing nothing. Because of conflicting economic interests in the rock, which Alaba seems oblivious to, different offers of

inducement are presented either to him or on his behalf. Alaba contributes in no small measure to the misplaced accent on the signpost. In the attempt to assist the pupil painter to get the correct accents, he relies on guesswork by tilting the flap of his cap:

PAINTER: (*sudden light*) I know, baba – accents!

ALABA: Akiset! You are clever... Akiset – I pull this up, akiset go up. I push this down, akiset come down. I can push both up or pull both down, but the middle one always stays put – look, I'll slap it flat so it does not confuse anyone. ... A...la...pa...ta A...pa...ta. Revision A...la...pa...ta A...pa...ta ...⁵ (*Continues more and more rhythmically, starts to dance*).

(Soyinka 2015: 80-81.)

The military's interest in the rock and their effort to secure its precious mineral is met without any resistance, even from Alaba. The General, however, reads the signpost (and its accents) correctly and redirects his troop in the wrong direction. Fela Anikulapo's music 'Zombie'⁶ which opens the scene gives concrete humour to the activities of the soldiers as they scramble to get away from the scene of the rock. The song mocks the soldiers for their lack of initiatives as they follow superior orders without questioning:

GENERAL: ...You fool, you are off course by at least fifteen kilometres point five, and you tell me position confirmed. This is Abà Alápatà, not Abà Alapáta. Alápatà. Alapáta. Two different places you tone deaf baboon! One is Butcher's hamlet, the other is where they split rocks! Your destination was the quarry, which you were ordered to secure.

(Soyinka 2015: 96.)

The manner of the soldiers' departure once again is attributed to some mysterious power of Alaba. The villagers believed he must have used some powers to confuse them. Alaba who is oblivious of the confusion generated by the signpost to which he contributes in no small measure to how it is spelt, continues undisturbed in his retired solitude. The widespread rumour of his exploit attracts 'tourists' to his enclave in order to see for themselves the mysterious Alaba. Teacher is visibly delighted as he attributes it to a 'spell' from Alaba. Spell then becomes an ambiguous and polysemous terminology in the context of the interaction between Teacher and the Trader:

TRADER: The spelling...

TEACHER: What is she talking about?

FRIEND: My friend here is trying to tell you that although the painting casts a spell, the spelling causes a fainting spell.

TEACHER: A-ah, casts a spell is right. We are all under a spell. I've been under a spell since last night, and you are fortunate to come under the spell. Soon the spell shall overwhelm the entire nation and abroad. And we owe it all to the spell cast by Alapata himself.

(Soyinka 2015: 103.)

Teacher's glowing inspiration is deflated after he realises the fool he has made of himself and his project. The audience is amused at his confusion until he realises that the correct spelling of the Yoruba words and its accents undermines his efforts. Through a misnomer, Alaba becomes a titled chief in his retirement. The understanding of the discursive cues of Alaba's interpretation of the whole event results in mild humour: "Chief! Did I ask to become a chief? No. Do I want to be? No. I try to offend no one. Except the cows, sheep, rams, turkey, chicken..." (114).

Alaba's acceptance of the chieftaincy conferred on him by the misplaced accent is comical. Given his predisposition to remain in retirement, there is a twist in plot as he

becomes more important than he was when he was a butcher. Alaba is no longer the butcher but the chief of *Apata*, a title in conflict with the traditional ruler of his village:

OLUWO: Stop! Stop right there. This court has just one question for you. Just where did you get the chieftaincy title of Alapata of Apata?

ALABA: (*Light slowly dawning*) The Àlapáta? Of Apata? Ah-ah. Is that my crime?

...

ALABA: (*Slowly clambering back to his feet*) Haba, my royal elders. It is the name I was given. The *akiset* was an *akisident*, so I tried to make the best of the situation. That has always been my problem. Too much initiative.

(Soyinka 2015: 164.)

As people now begin to consult him for advice on various problems, Alaba unwittingly becomes an adjudicator in matters of both domestic and national affairs. A domestic affair involving a mother and her daughter accusing her son-in-law of infidelity in marriage is brought before Alaba for him to rebuke the husband. During interrogation, Alaba appears to take the side of the plaintiff against the defendant until he suddenly turns the case around to the surprise of the other characters and the readers. In a sharp turn of event, he advises the defendant to be the man and marry another wife to show he has not forgotten his culture as an African. At this point, Alaba adjudicates in favour of the husband in a manner which seems contrary to the expectation of the participants/audience. This unexpected judgement confounds the husband, the wife, and the mother-in-law. The humour in Alaba's judgement results from the cultural knowledge he has of the social role of a man in the family. The man, as the head of the family, does not need his wife's permission to marry a second wife. Alaba questions the concept of monogamy as foreign to African. He believes that it erodes the values of Africans who had maintained a prosperous polygamous institution over time. Similarly, he believes that the African culture of polygamy can be sustained and strengthened to improve the family's number:

ALABA: ...Why do you want to ruin your family by abandoning your marital home when you can strengthen it? Come on, act like a man. Bring her home. Bring her into the home. Bring her into the home, and I want to hear before your next visit, that she has brought an addition to the family!

(Soyinka 2015: 127-128.)

The humour in most of the scenes arise from the utterly unexpected dramatic irony generated by the characters' anticipations and the eventual turn out of events.

7. Conclusion

Soyinka draws on the social and cultural awareness of his society to present the character that reminds the Nigerian audience of Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala), and his *Áwàdà Kerikeri* troupe. In deploying Yoruba language mixed with Pidgin English, plot twists and characterisation, we recognise the linguistic and cultural elements of humour. The humour consists in recognising incongruous elements present in the situations that surround the character of Alaba. The setting and relationship of the participants to the occasion are cultural participations that invite the audience to laugh at excesses of religious, cultural, and political leaders. The importance of humour in *Alápatà Apátà* is how Soyinka appropriates all these discourses (i.e. linguistic, political, religious, domestic, and national concerns) in a way that reflect all the areas of life in the Nigerian context. In assessing the humour deployed in Soyinka's *Alápatà Apátà*, it is important to see that the characters and the audience are

culturally situated within the context in which Soyinka projects them. By relying on common knowledge, references to social events, government policies, popular individuals, the play relies on plot twist and semantic oddities to show that humour, as much as it is a human phenomenon, is culturally defined. In the same vein, the humour is framed against a given cultural backdrop that the audience can, over time, retrieve from their background knowledge. This may account for why humour is intrinsically identifiable and has continued to excite theorists and find scholarly interventions across disciplines.

Notes

¹ *Alápatà Apátà*. The excerpts chosen for analysis are my own interpretations of the comic/ humorous elements in the play in order to reflect the thesis of the paper.

² *Alápatà tí n f'ran dárà!* 'The butcher that does wonder with meat'. Alaba is a butcher whose fame is widespread for his expertise at dressing meat and turning it into grill meat popularly known as 'suya'.

³ "*Wojé ni, amókùn, 'rù orì ' wojé O ni – ah, à t'isàlẹ̀pni*" 'They said to a person with deformity that the load on his head is crooked; he replied that it is from the leg'. *Amokun* as used here means 'deformity, a deformed person'. This expression presupposes a deformed person being informed about the load he carries as being crooked. He points out to the observer that the crookedness is from the foundation. Rightly so, that he is aware of the skewed nature of his problems. Alaba points out to the audience that his always getting on the wrong side of people's opinion of him is not only happening to him recently. He has always suffered from too much initiative especially when people do not understand his motives. He compares his situation to deformity in people's perceptions.

⁴ 'ABA ALABA ALAPATA Rt.D. Butcher Emeritus. MAESTRO DI SUYA' This is an invention of the Teacher. He ascribes these titles to Alaba to mirror the penchant of political leaders to amass titles and accolades. *Suya* is a popular name for grilled meat with pepper sauce.

⁵ A...la...pa...ta A...pa...ta. ... A...la...pa...ta A...pa...ta: The mid, high or low tones on the vowels are the differentiating aspect of these letters/sounds in Yoruba language.

⁶ 'Zombie' by Fela Anikulapo Kuti. Fela is a musician, a human right activist, and a social commentator. His song 'Zombie' is a parody of the military regime of the 1980s-90s, where soldiers carry out orders, sometimes incredulous, without questions. They are compared to zombies. Soyinka here creates soldiers who march in the wrong direction in complete obeisance to superior orders adding to the confusion in the play.

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