

## Joking About Liberal Democracy: A Critical Analysis of Verbal and Digital Media Jokes in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Contemporary expressions of frustration and disenchantment with liberal democracy in Africa by the civil society arise from the state of pauperization of the citizens, the daily doses of uncertainties about life and living, and the precarious creation of new mediocre feudal lords as state actors. The enigmatic being of liberal democracy in Africa is suggestive of “times of monstrous chimeras” that surmise the bizarre and the conversant which appears simultaneously, both to grind down and validate the futures of civil society. One of the factories of expressing civil society disenchantment and agitations against liberal democracy practice in Africa is the joke culture. This work, using Obadare’s model of ‘infrapolitics’ interrogates ways jokes illuminate the harsh realities of liberal democracy in Nigeria and how the civil society engages the state in the politics and ‘infrapolitics’ of governance and living. The methodology for this study involves the use of qualitative secondary data used in ethnographic, verbal and digital media communications. The data is then subjected to critical inquiry to interpret the layers and miasmas of meanings relevant to the thematic thrust of the paper. The work posits in its conclusion and findings that the civil society’s verbal and media confrontation with the state, in a joke turn phenomenon, itself constitutes a form of resistance and agitation for a better Nigeria.

**Keywords:** liberal democracy, coincidence, verbal, digital media, jokes, Nigeria

### Introduction

Jokes have been increasingly used as a vehicle to assess the expanding gap and relationship between the civil society and the state unveiling the contemporary human ridiculousness in African societies. Away from the initial thrust of entertainment but not without it, jokes have come to become a more politically engaged art form and as a strong weapon of the civil society to counter the hegemonic narratives of the state (Obadare 2009, 241). The vibrancy of verbal arts and the crucial presence of the social media have offered strong alternative spaces for

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articulating "civil" or "unruly" views of the contemporary disenchantment to various dimensions of what Jacques Derrida calls "plagues of the new world order" (Derrida 1994, 91). Increasingly engrossed in series of crises, the civil society, especially the younger generation, have shown their loss of appetite for liberal democracy, the harbinger of these layers of dissatisfaction, to actively replace waiting for good governance with wanting jokes that would offer subtle resistance, create avenue for showcasing their creative response to the mediocrity in politics and governance, and, by critiquing governance, generate a future oriented self and governance transformation and change necessary for the project of the future (Chikoto-Schultz and Uzochukwu 2016, 138). Strikingly, it is the emergence of liberal democracy that offers prospects for development through good governance, and in like fashion, the liberal space of the social media platform that spurs liberal, even outrageous views used to respond to activities in society (Peck 2015, 550, 551).

Thus, both the expanding verbal art of joking and its kindred in the media space are inspired by liberal democracy which media platforms have subjected to critical examination. The verbal artists and the social media may not be constituted as formal organizations or may not have connived at a point to individually or collectively launch their resistance against the state. Their spiritual connect arises from the panoramas of disenchantment about liberal democracy which no longer seems to create the much-desired development in society. The renaissance in the knowledge of the power of liberal democracy to generate development against the active players of state's politics of abstraction and self-introduced project of capital which turn citizens to markets creating in its wake "a disconcerting upsurge of violence, crime, and disorder (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 8) and that the "quest for democracy, the rule of law, prosperity, and civility threatens to dissolve into strife and recrimination, even political chaos" (Comaroff and

Comaroff, 2001, 8). Serious issues of unemployment, the conjecture of wealth and poverty, the fascination with democracy and the spiraling of civil strife, the coincidence of strengthened human rights and the politics of exclusion, the coupling of the policies of the messianic with the mesmerizing magical forms, and the unofficial strengthening of civil society with the presence of civil strife.

These odd marriages between the familiar and the strange underscores the ontological position of existence under liberal democracy in a disenchanted political space. These perplexing paradoxes of life and living prompt one to ponder over the meaning of western democracy and whether it appropriately serves its usefulness under prevailing political and economic quagmire orchestrated by the ruling civilians. It is becoming increasingly obvious, in view of the turbulence in the West African sub-region, that the younger generation is feeling disgruntled with the operations of liberal democracy in their various states thereby revealing the “new spectral reality” (Negri 2010, 9) of governance and the economy and subjecting the phenomenon to further investigation.

Liberal democracy seems to eclipse but then galvanizes and transforms the world of the disempowered and pauperized to creative heights of fearless joke making and performance that ushers in a form of resistance, the unconscious formation of a shared interest group of civil society, and easy mobilization of deterritorialized young group to militant expression of feeling gone awry. The essence of being civil members of society that are neglected is introducing a new kind of informal associations and consciousness via verbal means and the internet that offers impermanent commonality to interact, scheme resistance measures, and generally attempt to redefine the continent’s sordid condition through jokes, Twitter verse, popular hashtag, and other digital platforms. Certainly, the idea of modern liberal democracy is copiously challenged due to

the fruitlessness of its being and the material realities that stunt the sources of traditional-style development and blunt the modern values inherent in liberal democracy. The implication in the diminishing values of everyday lives is the open displays of everyday disenchantment about the contemporary liberal democracy (Lakemfa 2015, 11; Peck 2015, 552; Žižek 1997, 127; Gyimah-Boadi 1996, 118).

This paper is organized around five sections, each dealing with a specific aspect relating to the title and the thematic thrust thereof. The sections are "the crises of liberal democracy in West Africa" (which examines the most modern birth and backsliding of liberal democracy in the West African Sub-region), "democracy and development" (which locates democracy and development in polemical and practical terms), "joking about liberal democracy in Nigeria" (which analyses the jokes emanating from liberal democracy practice and the disillusionments theretofore), "jokes and the discourse on liberal democracy and disillusionments," (which projects and analyses jokes about liberal democracy and the ensuing disillusionment) and the "findings and conclusion" (which captures the nuances and deductions of the paper). There is also the works cited page which proves, to an extent, the acknowledgements of materials used in the course of the paper.

### **The Crisis of Liberal Democracy in West Africa**

Liberal democracy has been embraced in West Africa, as elsewhere in Africa, as the best form of government. It came about, in most African nations and the global South, in the wake of the disintegration of Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as a unipolar global power, influencing and putting pressure on nations, whose fashion was military dictatorship, to abandon misrule and embrace liberal democracy, the fashion of the moment in governance. The

external political pressure was capped with alluring economic pressure and promise of aid and cooperation should liberal democracy become the order of governance (see Gyimah-Boadi 1996, 4-6; Tar 2010, 81-2). There were also internal pressures and resistance from the West African homelands of dictators and despots leading to some concessions from those dictators in forms such as mixing civilians with the military in governance and forming of mirage transition time tables and transition committees. In Nigeria, for instance, the military junta leader, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida re-named himself military president from 1985-1993, a brand preferred by the military dictators supposedly aligned to democratic principles. Drawing a cue from Babangida are other modern military dictators such as Burkina Faso's Paul-Henri Damiba, leader of January 24 2022 Coup, who named himself President, and, in the same blood vein, Ibrahim Traore, who overthrow Damiba, also calls himself President and "guarantor of national independence, territorial integrity...and continuity of the state" (VOA Africa broadcast 8<sup>th</sup> October 2022: 16:00). As is with all paradoxes about African institutions and personalities, the paradox of liberal democracy has its reverting root in kindred spirits of military civilians of time past.

It is worth revisiting history that the gradual but steady transition from military misrule to democratic transitions in West Africa, as elsewhere in Africa, began in the late 1980s to the 1990s. Nigeria, the region's model and power house, was gradually grinded in economic and political quagmire and "convulsions" (Gyimah-Boadi 1996, 5); under an out-of-control Marxist-Leninist one-party state, Benin was not only in economic meltdown but also civil unrest; Liberia was in a power tussle civil war from 1989, same for Sierra Leone in 1991; Ghana, relatively better under Jerry Rawlings, was losing economic thrust; Cote d'Ivoire moved from strength to

civil strife, and generally there permeated the emerging spirit for the taste for liberal democracy in the West African region of the 1980s and 1990s.

Booed by the political democratic liberalization processes elsewhere and fermented in the internal taste for liberal democracy at home, the military juntas were left with no option but to work within the frame of the hovering spirit of liberal democracy crying to be entrenched. Benin Republic was the first point of call of this expressive spirit of liberal democracy. The whole country was submerged by the protest of university students, civil society organizations, school teachers, market women, civil servants, and even church groups, compelling Mathieu Kerekou, the President, to opt for the soft landing of a “sovereign National Conference” which sooner came into effect in February 1990. The concessions of the conference include a liberal democratic constitution, the guarantee for human rights, the freedom for the operation of political parties, and several other privileges denied earlier. The spirit of liberal democracy that visited Benin also visited Togo, Mali, Niger, and Guinea among others which held their national conferences around 1990-1993. In Ghana and Cote D’Ivoire, where no conference held, were attempts to address the surging menace of the epidemic of protests. Flight Lieutenant J.J Rawlings began to accept options other than his Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) readying for a return to democratic governance in 1992. And Houphouet Boigny of Cote D’Ivoire reviewed the controversial Article 7 of the constitution to allow for multiparty competition. These giant steps, arising from the series of agitations, set the groundwork for the emergence of liberal democratic dispensation in West Africa (Gyimah-Boadi 2021; Diamond, 2008; Prempeh, 2008; Ake, 1993; Peter, 1995)

It may be noted that although some residues of dictatorship punctured some liberal democratic landscapes of some African countries, the majority of them found themselves, firmly

fixed, in liberal democratic governance and values in the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many measures of democratic reforms occurred such as the bill of rights, the freedom of the judiciary, provision for anti-graft agencies, and electoral commissions. The electronic media, internet links, newspapers, digital media, radios and television stations, and the liberal spirit expanded and prevailed sending off notions such as "president for life," but softly introducing "constitutional Change" and "third term." Parliaments began to function more and flourish in their oversight functions thereby checkmating some excesses of government. Also, the Economic Community of West African States Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance contributed in reducing errant acts by declaring as "unconstitutional" regimes rooted on the barrel of the gun. To this end, ECOWAS suspended Togo (2005), Guinea (2008-2009), Niger (2009-2011), Cote D'Ivoire (2010-2011), Mali (2011). Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali are some of the latest culprits (2021-23). Perhaps due to its offshoot from insincere dictatorships, the institution of democratic structures, governance and values did not regulate itself as these were caught napping in the cause of duty in dereliction, power politics, compromised elections, and other factors. Due largely to desperate power tussle, the civil society have been grossly neglected making them pauperized while the leaders are in extreme wealth. Instead of the dividends of democracy, there is the transformation of the populace into a disease and the transmogrification of the ruling elites as salvific of an impending epidemic. The values of liberal democracy are submerged in the vortex of megalomania of elected leaders thereby undermining development.

### **Democracy and Development**

There has been a gradual decline of democracy in West Africa due to the assault on it by the flagbearers, the elites in governance. Democracy aligns itself with development but the type

practiced in African nations reflects the democracy of the self, what, in this paper is termed selfocrazy, meaning the self and its crazy nature combine to work as one-selfocrazy. Gyimah-Boadi (2021) has pointed out factors such as constitutional negligence, economic mismanagement, authoritarian political culture, the colonial vestige of "divide and conquer" and several others as giving rise to this self-centeredness (Gyimah-Boadi 2021, 14-18). The rise and proliferation of technology and the digital media have enabled more access to information to the general public and as well the rise of fake news. Also, extreme violence, insurgency, the explosion of incivility, radicalization, terrorism, and several vices, are helping in the relapsing of liberal governance atop the economic mismanagement, corruption, and the politics of exclusion. For the West African sub-region, the debate about democracy and development, as to how the formal will necessitate the latter, seems to hit a gridlock based on the current realities in their countries. Priority is now accorded democracy and politics because "the nexus between democracy and development remains contestable" (Adejumobi 2000, 4). There is however the need to realign democracy with development so that the obstacles to democracy's contribution to development would be eradicated. Adam Michnik, a veteran of the Polish struggle for democracy states that:

Democracy is neither black nor red. Democracy is gray...It chooses banality over excellence, shrewdness over nobility, empty promise over true competence...It is eternal imperfection, a mixture of sinfulness, saintliness and monkey business. This is why the seekers of a moral state and of a perfectly just society do not like democracy. Yet only democracy—having the capacity to question itself -- also has the capacity to correct its own mistakes. (Michnik 1996, 22-3)



Although this assertion rejects the condition of a ‘prerequisite’ for democracy, it holds strength that democracy advances socio-economic development, participation and inclusiveness, ensure the distribution of wealth, enhancing of literacy and life expectancy, freedom and political rights, and security among others which are categorized as development. The space between the liberal democratic stakeholders and the civil society is filled by constructions and deconstructions with varying layers of meanings and are expressed and filtered in the joke culture media. Mikhail Bahktin avers that “Laughter represents an unofficial and subversive means of expression, a freedom in the midst of restrictions” (quoted in Findlen 1998, 249). What democracy offers and would not offer are represented through laughing out the moments from the jokes of these memorable moments.

### **Joking about Liberal Democracy in Nigeria**

State power has been exercised in African states with tumultuous consequences. And this is happening in spite of the fact that the African states are endowed with abundant human and material resources that could launch the continent to heights of development better imagined. The high expectations in the struggle and attainment of liberal democracy have been dashed and the spirit for it diminished. The frustration with liberal democracy arises from the heap of unrealized aspirations, a “new feudalism” (Connelly and Kennedy 1994, 61), the introduction of divisive ideological tropes of divide and rule, the creation of a market economy, a free market, as if the market has a human feeling of its own, reducing the democratic deepening through precarious living conditions, denials, hardships, absences, and the creation of an atmosphere of chaos, incivility, desperation, and violence. The political actors seem not rule-bound exercising

bad and corrupt governance, roughshod over subjects, and subjecting the liberal democracy to risks of acceptance and patronage (Gyimah-Boadi 2021, 15).

In Nigeria, the worst of times in the exercise of dictatorship or of liberal democracy is the best of times to exercise unity as an article of faith to demonstrate togetherness especially the younger generation. In such periods, as is with football and sports generally, identities of ethnicity, religion, region, political alliance and other divisive loyalties are brutally brushed aside to fight for a cause. One of such ways of coming together is in the creation, conversation, and performance of jokes in verbal and media circles. When the state actors tell their unconvincing story, the young generation must start telling their narrative, else only the story of the state actors would be believed, and this is expressed through the joke culture. Many still wonder what jokes can do to change a barrage of disenchantments and damage to the future. However, the reinvention of verbal and media jokes in “times of monstrous chimeras and evil dreams and criminal follies” (Conrad 1957, Ch. 4) of liberal democracy is a social referent to its value, accepting Francis Bacon’s view that “The monuments of wit survive the monuments of power” (Bacon 1988, 54). The joke culture has come of age in a liberal democracy that it can no longer be easily brushed aside as unserious subject for interrogation. The joke lore has come to be a vital means to subvert, deconstruct, reconstruct, and refocus liberal democracy, even reinvent society. Jokes are capable of puncturing “the hubris of official spaces, at the same time, it is used to ensure that informal spaces are protected from the humorlessness that is believed to characterize many formal spaces” (Obadare 2010, 96). Archilles Mbembe states that all African governments in liberal democracies do is to launch a ‘systematic application of pain’ on its people (Mbembe 1992, 4); and the jokes on liberal democracy are a form of resistance, protest, and creation of a collective subaltern voice to the ‘systematic pain’ in society.

### **Jokes and the discourse on Liberal Democracy and Disillusionments**

Just as liberal democratic entrenchment has its roots in earlier struggles against despotic military governance, same have jokes started in the military upheavals, in my view, beginning with the tragic death of Nigeria's renown journalist, Dele Giwa who was killed by a letter bomb. It was obvious that the military government had a knowledge or hand in the killing but the jokes were uttered in verbal and muted public circles until Fela Anikolapo Kuti, the fearless Afro musician brought out the song "Who killed Dele Giwa?" Na Baba, if you add gida na you sabi! The second, to me, was the undisputable tyrant, military Head of State, General Sani Abacha who died on June 8, 1998. Jokes about his death circulated almost immediately to show Nigerian's feeling for his death and for Nigeria. This joke, also recorded by Obadare, depicts the personality in Hell as was in Nigeria. Abacha was heading to Heaven when he was reverted to Hell:

As he made his way to his new abode, the late victims of his terror in Nigeria followed in hot pursuit and furiously rained blows on him. Abacha started running to avoid his pursuers and eventually found a place to hide. While in hiding, he found a phone booth and quickly called Nigeria to ask from one of his assistants how Nigeria was faring under his successor, 'Salami' [chatty abbreviation of Abdulsalam]. When he was told that everywhere was peaceful, and that there had been no arrests of political opponents, no assassinations, etcetera, he exclaimed, 'Kai [exclamation common to northerners], Salami don spoil Nigeria!' [Abdulsalam has messed up Nigeria]. He also asked after prominent pro-democracy activists, only to be told that they were home and not in prison, in response to which he exclaimed, 'Shege [another exclamation, often denoting amazement

and/or helplessness], Salami don spoil Nigeria!’ (Gbenga Adeboye, *Extravaganza*, Volume 1 (Audio CD, Queen Omolara Label, 2000))

This narrative reveals the tragic ends of despotic rulers.

### **A Nigerian Governor wants to paint the Government house**

A Nigerian Governor wants to paint the Government House. There is a call for quotation and response came from the following who got interviewed.

Chinese guy quoted 3 million.

European guy quoted 7 million.

Nigerian guy quoted 10 million.

The Governor asked the Chinese guy

“How did you quote 3 million?”

Chinese guy replied: "1 million for paint, 1 million for labour, and 1 million profit"

The Governor asked European guy

He replied: "3 million for paint, 2 million for labour, and 2 million profit"

The Governor asked Nigerian guy: He replied: "4 million for you, 3 million for me, and we will give 3 million to the Chinese guy and ask him to paint!"

The Nigerian guy got the contract!

Obviously, corruption is shown as the bane of liberal democratic governance in Nigeria.

Why was the Nigerian toddler crying?

He was going through midlife crisis.

<https://jokojokes.com/nigeria-jokes.html#nigeria-short-jokes>

Even Nigerian babies have become infantile adults to feel the excruciating pain brought about by state actors of contemporary liberal democracy.

How many Nigerians does it take to change a light bulb?

None! Because there was no electricity in Nigeria.

Buhari to PHCN Manager: What is happening to power? (supply)

Manager: Your Excellency Sir, all power belongs to God.

The acronym PHCN is **Power Holding Company of Nigeria**.

Power supply has been epileptic and this joke satirizes the phenomenon.

Osinbajo to Buhari: Sir, this is the list of promises we made to Nigerians during campaign.

Buhari: But this is not my handwriting

*The Guardian Newspaper* Nigeria.

Promises made by would-be leaders are not fulfilled, sometimes they are denied as we observe in this joke. Handwriting is prioritized over promises.

Kalu: Why did you ask to be buried with a Nigerian flag?

Akpos: When God sees my flag, He will know I have been to Hell before!

Liberal democratic governance in Nigeria sometimes equates to Hell.

Uche: Mummy, I'm going to Wole's house.

Mom: There's no fuel in the car.

Uche: But mummy, I'm taking a walk.

Mom: If you get missing, is it not the fuel in the car we'll use to look for you?

All forms of insecurity from kidnapping, ritual disappearances, and cult practices make a mother cautious. Also, this joke reveals the hardships faced by Nigerians about fuel, when Nigeria is one of the highest oil producers.

A British man asked his Nigerian friend, "What is ASUU?"  
"It's an Annual Festival in Nigeria where students don't go to school for several months at a go."

### **Findings and Conclusion**

Some of the findings include the benefits accruing from liberal democracy such as human and work rights, democratic choice making provisions, adherence to constitutional rule, and the opening up of creative avenues such as the creation and performance of jokes in verbal, public, and media platforms. Democracy's backsliding, however, brought to the fore disillusionment of the mind and spirit thus causing extreme reactions, uncertainties, and resistance. The liberal democracy's wrong footing by the state actors have created a state of active participation in the

affairs of governance on the side lines of verbal and digital discourses using various means of resistance and expression of disenchantment. Jokes happen to be one such instrument used in critiquing and reconstructing the meanings and miasma in society. The crisis of liberal democracy has facilitated the creation, expansion, and performance of jokes that invite critical assessment of contemporary political relationship between the governors and the governed. While the future may seem adjacent, the performances of various ways of resistance by the younger generation point to a future in-waiting, in time.

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