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Critiquing the Depiction of Poverty: Piety and Christianity in selected Nigerian Newspapers' Cartoons

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Abstract

Some holiness churches believe that Christianity is synonymous with material poverty. Material poverty in relation to the religion as believed in some quarters is even taken to be a clear ticket needed by the devotees to please and share a paradise with God. This can be so, if the ideology behind the Monks and Nuns in the olden days is anything to go by. From the above statement, it is observed that there was once a nexus between the religion and poverty. The extant literature showed that editorial cartoons have played great roles in the political formation and condemnation of corrupt practices in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper shall examine how Christianity and Poverty are represented in the Editorial Cartoons of some national dailies in Nigeria. This is with a view to investigating whether Christianity as projected in the editorial cartoons of the selected national dailies has a close rank with poverty or both are considered as two parallel lines which have no

meeting point. The paper adopted a semiotics content and thematic analyses of the manifest data of the *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Punch*, *Vanguard* and *Daily Trust* newspapers based on their wide readership. These were analysed from systematically selected editions of the papers. The findings indicated that the editorial cartoons of the selected papers were really used to establish that the religion and poverty have a very close link. The paper concluded that the editorial cartoonists as noted in the selected works have failed to observe the current trend of affluence in the religion, particularly among the Pentecostals.

Key words: Christian values, Poverty, Corruption, Cartoons, Cross in Christianity.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to critically look into the ways the editorial cartoons of the selected national dailies were used to show that, if at all, there is a link between poverty and Christianity as a religion. This is with a view to identifying and explaining the relevance and meaning of illustrations of images or symbols to expose ideas and issues reflecting the details of the representation of the religion in the light of poverty that has pervaded the land. Though, poverty has no boundary, it knows no religion, colour, race or sex, it has become so prevalent on the continent of Africa. The reason for the above statement according to the World Bank report is due to bad leadership. Is there any causal connection that ties Christianity and poverty together? What is the position of the newspapers' editorial cartoonists on the phenomenon? Is the religion the same as poverty examining it from ideological perspective? What about the level of affluence being demonstrated by some Pentecostal churches in the country? Using the selected editorial cartoons, the above stated posers will be examined and critically analysed.

The use of language through manipulation of linguistics, paralinguistic and non-linguistic items to provoke inferences or implicature in a literary or dramatic work like cartoons are seemingly becoming a serious tool employed by the media to either commend or

condemn a social issue (poverty, corruption, violence etc.) or governmental ideas or policies. Though, cartoon is widely acknowledged for its satirical and ridiculing form of lampooning through images, symbols and caricatures, it is an embodiment of strategies used in information dissemination towards public education. Recently, editorial cartoon as a genre in media practices has become a formidable force to reckon with particularly in the agenda setting focus of media houses. Cartoons show a great potency in the data validation of phenomenal studies. According to El Refaie cartoons functions as a solid way of communication within the four walls of the society.⁵ According to Akinloye, editorial cartoons are formidable instruments of opinion formation transforming otherwise complex social issues into quick and easily readable depictions that facilitate understanding of the event in question.⁶ Scholars saw cartoons as a significant tool in the propagation and promotion of the Nigerian cultural system.

History of Editorial Cartooning

In the history of cartooning, the name of a foremost and famous American cartoonist, Benjamin Franklin who first published an editorial cartoon in an American newspaper in 1754 could not just be forgetting in a jiffy. Franklin wanted the American colonies to unite against the British so that corporately they can fulfil their mission and this he did through cartooning instead of writing. He symbolized this thought through a cartoon entitled "join or die".⁷ The snake which he cut into pieces represented the fact that the colonies cannot survive if they are not united. It was a myth then that if snake cut into pieces were later joined together, the possibility of surviving is very high. Generally, understanding cartooning entails a fair knowledge of the issues in question hence the simplicity in the drawing. The prime objective of cartoonist in using symbols, caricatures, stereotypes and

⁵ El Refaie, E. *et al*, Multiliteracies: how readers interpret political cartoons in *Visual Communication*, Vol. 8, 2009, p. 181.

⁶ Akinloye, J. 'I voted Only for the Head too: Visual Satire and the Democratic Governance in Africa' in *International Journal of Comic Arts*, 2014.

⁷ Iro, S. *et al*, Linguistic Analysis on the Construction of Satire in Nigerian Political Cartoons: The Example of Newspaper Cartoons, in *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, Vol. 4(3), 2012, pp. 52-59.

analogies is to ensure that the readers form and build opinion(s) around the work.

Throughout Nigerian history, editorial cartoons have served as unique windows to show the worth of both grassroots and national practices of the citizenry including religion. According to Onipede as cited in Odewale, comic exaggeration as a form of arts is not the innovation of white men; it has been in Nigeria as a form of lampooning social political ills before the advent of the colonial masters.⁸ Traditionally, the operational theory of cartoon has been part and parcel of the Nigerian society which was used to ridicule and correct the vices of the society. This act of lampooning found expressions in verbal and visual elements including proverbial and mocking songs often rendered during festivals like Egungun and Oro in Yoruba land. In the sphere of religion, cartoon is an instrument of visual propaganda that was religiously used during Martin Luther reformation in Germany. As a result of high level of illiteracy among the people then, there was a need to pass difficult information against Pope and clergy via visual satire. Consequent upon this, Lutheran artists in Wittenberg and Nuremberg produced many broadsheets and pamphlets satirising Catholic beliefs.

However, according to Olaniyan the modern form of cartooning has no proper linkage with the indigenous type; it is purely the innovation of the colonial masters. This is as a result of the contact with the Western world. The first Nigerian cartoonist to work in the media was Akinola Lasekan. He was so popular because of his exploration on the political dimension of the country. Unlike nowadays, Lasekan made use of woodblocks, an approach which made embellishment almost impossible. As a graphic artist, teacher and illustrator, Lasekan worked with the *West Africa Pilot*, a paper established in 1937 by Nnamdi Azikwe (1904 – 1996). According to Jegede, Lash was occupied with lot of social ills that characterised the then colonial administration. Unlike the modern newspapers, his cartoons were often found on the front page of the daily.

⁸ Odewale, V., Use of Editorial Cartoons to Project Christian Values in Fighting Corruption in Nigeria, in *Journal of University Scholars of Religions*, Vol. 5, 2015, pp. 718-738.

Literature Review

According to previous studies on editorial cartoons as a genre, much has been said about the nature and role cartoons play in reshaping studies across disciplines, be it media, psychology, religion, education or sociology. For instance, Handl in his work pinpointed on common themes of political practices in Australia while examining political cartoons in Australian newspapers;⁹ Bormann *et al* paid much attention to the content analysis of political cartoons;¹⁰ Morris critically looked at the visual power of political cartoons purposely to establish the performance of political issues in society;¹¹ in South Africa, Wigston examined the role of political cartoons in Aids struggle.¹² Still on the visual power of cartoons, Olaniyan exposed the traditions of cartoons in the Nigerian print media.¹³ From the cultural and political perspective, Conners investigated the weapons embedded in the political cartoons during the 2004 US presidential campaign.¹⁴ In portraying the Zimbabwean political structure, Willems studied the satirical depiction of the president.¹⁵ Lamb identified political cartoons as instruments of ridiculing political leaders and their policies.¹⁶ Benoit *et al* while examining 2000 cartoons based on Clinton-Lewinsky saga identified cartoons as viable tools in condemning social vices.¹⁷ In the use of cartoons to project Christian values, Odewale also examined critically the role of editorial cartoons as spring board for condemnation or commendation of the religion approach to corrupt practices.¹⁸ However, the study of cartoons in relation to religion is

⁹Handl, H., Stereotyping in mass media: The case of political caricature in Australia daily newspapers in *Angewandte-sozialforschung*, Vol. 16, 1990, pp. 101-107.

¹⁰ Bormann, et al, Political cartoons and salient rhetorical fantasies: An Empirical analysis of the '76 presidential campaign, in *communication Monographs*, Vol. 45, 1978, pp. 317-329.

¹¹Morris, R., Visual Rhetoric in political cartoons: A structuralist approach in *Metaphor and Symbol* Vol. 8, 1993, pp. 195-210.

¹²Wigston, D. Aids and political cartoons: A case study, 2002.

¹³ Olaniyan, T., The tradition of CARTOONING in Nigeria in *Glendora Review African Quarterly on the Arts*, Vol. 2, 1997, pp.

¹⁴ Conners, J., Popular Culture in Political Cartoons: Analysing Cartoonists Approaches in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 40, 2007, pp. 261-265.

¹⁵ Willems, W. Comics Strips and "the Crisis": Postcolonial Laughter and coping with everyday life in Zimbabwe in *Popular communication*, Vol. 9, 2011, pp. 126-145.

¹⁶Lamb, C., Drawn to extremes: The use and abuse editorial cartoons: in *Nieman Report*, Vol. 58, 2004, pp. 44-46.

¹⁷ Benoit, W., et al, A fantasy theme analysis of political cartoons on the Clinton-Lewinsky Starr affair in *Crit Stud. Media Commun*, Vol. 18, 2001, pp. 377-394.

¹⁸ Odewale, V., Use of Editorial Cartoons to Project Christian Values in Fighting Corruption in Nigeria, in *Southern Semiotic Review* (12) 2020

rare compared to other areas like economy, politics and communication where there has been a considerable progress in research work. Therefore an attempt is made in this paper to examine the representation of Christianity and poverty in the selected editorial cartoons of Nigerian national dailies. This is with a view to analyzing the graphic representation of vital themes like Christianity and Christian figures, social cum economic privations, and poverty. The selected cartoons were based on recognizable religious connotations and presented in a way to provoke critical thinking.

Poverty and its Causes

Poverty, according to encyclopedia Americana cited in Alasiri can be viewed from the perspectives of inability to meet the basic needs and lack of self-control from external forces.¹⁹ Fashina defined poverty as futile efforts in addressing basic necessity of life due to inability to earn good income or acquire property.²⁰ Poverty is an endemic trend generating untold hardship prevalent among the low income earners, particularly the youth, the aged, unemployed, and the pensioners among other. It can also be regarded as a social condition in which material resources are lacking. It is a state in which an individual or a group lacks material resources that are necessary for subsistence. In other words, poverty connotes a condition in which one is unable to live well because of lack of basic needs such as food, water, clothing and shelter.²¹ This does not know religion, race, tribe or colour and in Nigeria, over 70% of the population wallow in abject penury.²² According to Ijaiya *et al*, there are five dimensions in poverty showcased in deprivation and these include: cultural, social, political, physical, and economic deprivations.²³ Out of

Journal of University Scholars of Religions, Vol. 5, 2015, pp. 718-738.

¹⁹ Alasiri, W., An Assessment of the Influence of Cooperative Marketing Association on Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria in *SM & BS, Lagos State Polytechnic, Ikorodu, Lagos. 2013*, pp. 154-164.

²⁰ Fashina, O., Nigeria economic growth process, foreign direct investment and poverty eradication in *O. S. Ogundiran (ed.) Proceedings of 3rd annual national conference on National Security and economic*, 2012, pp.154-164

²¹ Awoniyi, S., Poverty and Christian Welfare Scheme: Evidence from the Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion) Osun State, Nigeria, in *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 2015, pp. 74-91.

²² Alasir, W., An Assessment of the Influence of Cooperative Marketing Association on Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria in *SM & BS, Lagos State Polytechnic, Ikorodu, Lagos. 2013*, pp. 154-164.

²³ Ijaiya, G. *et al*, Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction in Nigeria in *International Journal of Businesses and Science*, Vol. 2, 2011, pp. 147-154.

this, economic deprivation is in line with this paper as this has to do with inaccessibility to good income, property, factors of production and assets of various sorts.²⁴ Whoever lacks the above items could be said to be poor as Ayoola Kehinde cited in Ohwojevwe Ganiyu explained that poverty has become a regular way of life.²⁵ The causes of this endemic monster in our society are partly traceable to the insensitivity of the government to the plight of its citizens and these are often manifested through the misplacement of priority as exemplified by the cartoon below. The concern of this paper, however, is to look at how the editorial cartoons of the nation's newspapers have painted the religion in the light of poverty that has become part and parcel of our daily lives in Nigeria.

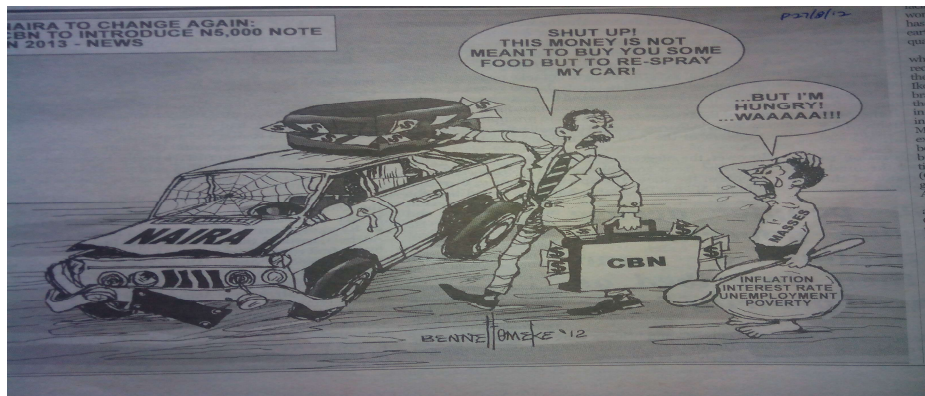


Figure 1. New Naira Note (#5,000) Proposal (Benne Omeke, Punch, 2012).

Using the imagery of symbol and metaphor, the cartoonist, Benne in his authorial intrusive manner, lampooned the Federal Government and her bank named Central bank of Nigeria (CBN) for their nonchalant attitudes to the welfare of the citizenry. At that time, average Nigerians, regardless of their religion, extremely found it difficult to have three square meals per day. Naira has lost its power and inflation has taken over, unemployment and high rate of interest adorned the nation's financial sector with Nigerians in the toga of hunger and poverty. The rickety car named 'naira' is presumably demanding for attention likewise the skeletal figure tagged 'masses'. The masses who was crying for food has a plate where the following inscriptions were made: inflation, interest

²⁴ Alasir, W., An Assessment of the Influence of Cooperative Marketing Association on Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria in *SM & BS, Lagos State Polytechnic, Ikorodu, Lagos. 2013*, pp. 154-164.

²⁵ Ohwojevwe, G., Poverty, Literature and Human Existence in Nigeria, in O. S. Ogundiran (ed.) *Proceedings of 3rd annual national conference on National Security and economic*, 2013, pp. 165-171.

rate, unemployment, and poverty. This four items have contributed tremendously in negatively subjecting Nigerians to abject poverty. With his long spoon, he hoped to get a fair share into his plate but the man simply told him in a commanding tone that the money was not meant for him. What a misplacement of priority! On the other hand, the man clad in suit was loading the ramshackle car with hard notes running into billions of our local currency just to renovate or refurbish the car (naira). Generally, this cartoon was used admissibly to show that there is poverty in the land. As a result of hues and cries that greeted the decision of the government at that time, the idea was dropped.

Analyses of the Selected Cartoons

Three contemporary cartoons by cartoonists of repute were drawn from three newspapers for analyses. The thought provoking issues generated by the cartoons excerpted from *Nigerian Tribune*, *Punch* and *Daily Trust* were decorated by sundry themes raging from poverty to ethical issues in Christianity.

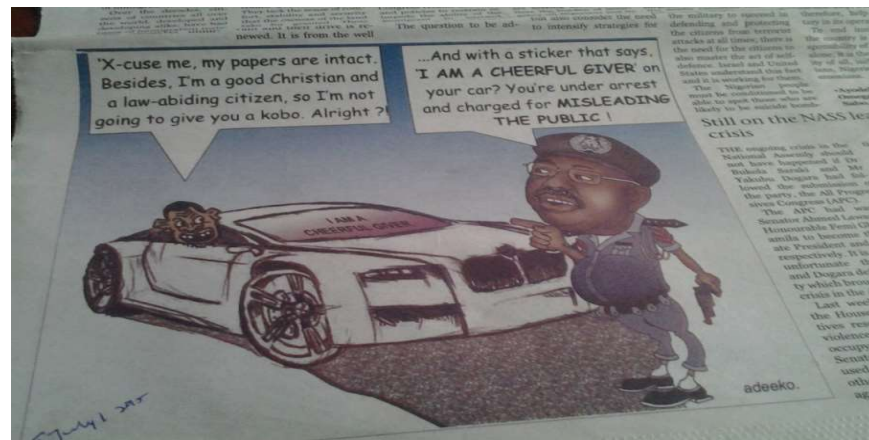


Figure 2: "Christian versus Corrupt policeman" (Adeeko 2015).

Figure 2 ("Christian versus Nigeria police" by Adeeko), a single panel frame depiction of a robust pot-belly police sergeant demanding for a tip-off before the skeletal cadaverous Christian in his ramshackle car could be allowed to pass. The symbols and imagery of metaphors used clearly spelt out that the motorist is identified as a Christian, courtesy of his utterance and the sticker used while the uniform of the law enforcement agent proved

him to be a member of the Nigeria Police Force. Generally in an Africa setting, standard of living of people at first sight is assessed through their robustness and so whoever looks thin and malnourished despite his affluence may be assumed poor or decked with sickness. On that premise, the two caricatures visually juxtaposed two different metaphors of the society. The haggard looking Christian and robust looking policeman share a feeling that Christians, because of their faith, endure suffering and the security agent is enjoying, feeding fat on corrupt values of the society which are aberrations to Christians. Besides, the tatterdemalion car which the Christian drove established the fact that the motorist is poor. This could be deduced from his inability to change his right-hand car to align with driving rules of the country. The type of car (a 2-door car) he was driving also testified to his low social status. Nowadays, the rich hardly go in a 2-door car, they prefer 4-doors or more for the sake of comfortability. Juxtaposing two ideological positions, the cartoonists was able to portray the motorist as a criminal though he professed to be law abiding. This was done through the caricature of the right-hand car.

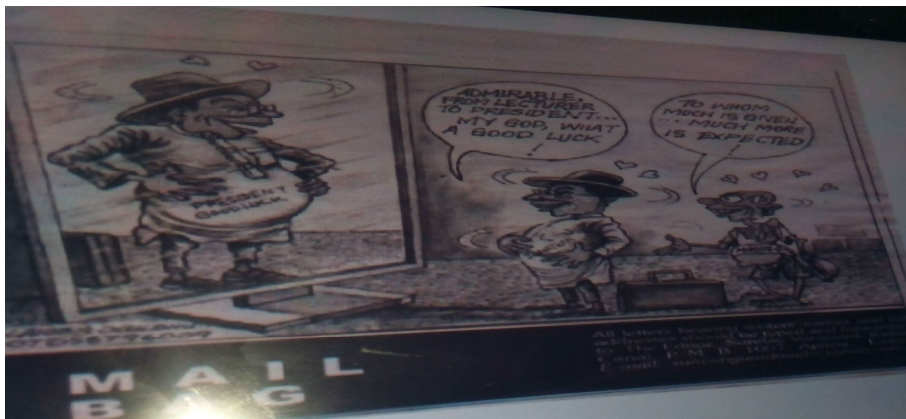


Figure 3. Pot-belly ex-president Jonathan and skeletal Christian beggar. Vanguard, July 30, 2010.

This is a double panel frame exposing the beggarly nature of the religion and at the same time satirizing the political class for its insensitivity to the plight of the masses. The skeletal frame at the back of the ex-president was taken to be Christian because of the mark of the cross on his head. In the use of symbols, the mark of the cross stands for two images: Christianity and hospital. In this cartoon, however, the former meaning relation

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is adopted. The figure at the back of Jonathan bearing the mark of cross on his head had a container in his hand quoting the scripture ("to whom much is given much is expected") apparently soliciting for assistance from the ex-president, Jonathan. The physique of the beggar named masses is poverty personified. Two imagery of the cross and the scripture proved beyond reasonable doubt that the gaunt is of Christianity. Therefore, the posture of the cross-headed beggar standing behind the obese ex-president, established nothing but poverty on the part of the beggar. Quoting from the Christian sacred writing, the gaunt said "to whom much is given much is expected". With cap in hand, he was looking unto Jonathan for a bail-out from his state of penury. With no attention from Jonathan, it may be possible to conclude that the toga of poverty will for long be on the symbolized Christian beggar.

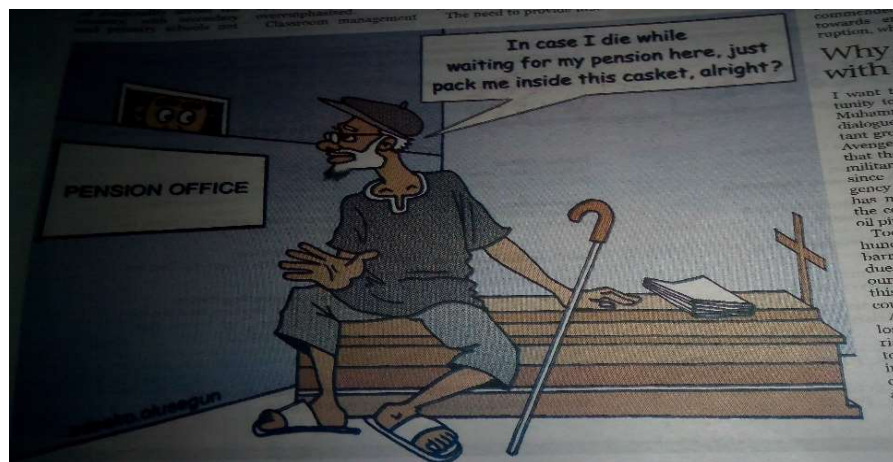


Figure 4. Pension office and pensioner (Adeeko, Nigerian Tribune, 2016).

Though this cartoonist, through the use of imagery, metaphor and symbol, ridiculed the body saddled with the responsibility of looking after the retirees in the country. This was at a time when series of scams were recorded in the national pension office which led to the loss of colossal sum of money to the hand of few corrupt government officials. As a result of this development a lot of pensioners died, sometime at where constant verifications of their papers were being carried out without any meaningful achievement. Others died of one ailment or the other and this is as a result of their inability to feed well or afford necessary medication. The dressing of the aged, white-bearded man

characterized with a staff (walking stick) and eye glasses confirmed that he is old. He simply informed the unidentified pension officer staring at him from a rectangular pigeon hole to pack him in the casket bearing a symbol of Christianity (cross) in case dies. Here, the religion is again decked with penury imagery. The wooden coffin is skeletally put together to reflect the poor state of the old man. With his document placed on the casket, the old man showed that he has given up on the pursuit of his right (pension) and that is why he eventually surrendered to fate. The fate (endless waiting for gratuity and pension that never paid) of this retiree is one of many, the pensioners experience in Nigeria.

Conclusion

As a result of some values and teachings that emphasized on Godliness and contentment in Christendom, general notion holds that Christians cannot be super rich especially in this part of the world where corruption and sharp practices dot all economic dealings. A spiritually balanced Christian cannot commit fraud or embezzle public fund because of the desire to get rich, he or she prefers to be poor than be enriched fraudulently. However, this notion appears to be fast disappearing especially among the Pentecostals where emphasis is not laid on the rightness or wrongness of sources of income. Partly based on this assertion, there exist some legitimately rich people in the religion who the cartoonists in our Nigerian dailies do not take cognizance of while discharging their journalistic duty, hence we see the religion fully presented in the garment of poverty. Though some members may be averagely poor, the church institution is stinkingly rich. That is why in recent times some state governors were calling for heavy taxation on Churches. The ideology behind the Monks and Nuns are no longer real in nowadays practices of Christianity. Therefore, the cartoonists need a paradigm shift of thought and action in the projection and representation of the religion.

In all the cartoons examined or analysed in this paper, no one painted the religion rich. Though the cartoons assumed different forms and styles, the caricatures of the religion as portrayed are presented cadaverously, showing the level of poverty decorating the totality of the religion and this, perhaps may be towing the old part of Friar and mendicants as believed in some quarters of the society.

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