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**David A. Donkor**

# SELLING THE PRESIDENT: STAND-UP COMEDY AND THE POLITRICKS OF INDIRECTION IN GHANA

On 15 May 1995, the Alliance for Change (AFC), a coalition of opposition leaders in Ghana, organized a demonstration that came to be known by the name Kume Preko (which translates as "Kill me once and for all") to protest the government's new value-added tax (VAT) policy. During the demonstration, armed supporters of Jerry Rawlings, Ghana's president, set upon the marchers, killing four people, including a fourteen-year-old boy. The AFC charged that members of the ruling party were implicated in the killings. It also dismissed a police report on the incident as a "cheap and fraudulent cover-up" that was "contradicted by the abundant evidence."[1] An article in the leading opposition newspaper, the *Ghanaian Chronicle*, criticized Rawlings's government for flouting the constitutional right to public dissent and called the violence against the demonstrators "Hitlerism in Ghana."[2] The Kume Preko violence dealt Rawlings a political blow: it dented his image as a man of the people and the credibility of his commitment to a new liberal democratic political regime in Ghana.

Following Kume Preko, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), Rawlings's political party, turned to a stand-up comedian to restore Rawlings's image and credibility as he prepared for the 1996 presidential elections. The party secured a political endorsement from Ghana's top comedian of stage and television, Bishop Bob Okala. Okala's genre of stand-up comedy has a history that goes back eight decades. Nowadays called *gyimi* (a word in the Twi language of the Akan people), or comic foolery, the genre features comedians in grotesque

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*David Afriyie Donkor is Assistant Professor of Performance and Africana Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station. He holds a Ph.D. in performance studies from Northwestern University and an M.F.A. in directing from Minnesota State University, Mankato. His research explores the interplay of cultural performance, political legitimacy, and national policy.*

This essay is based on my earlier "'Lies' with 'Openings' Comedian Bob Okalla [*sic*] and the *Politricks* of Performance," in Donkor, *Spiders in the City: Trickster and the Politics/Economics of Performance in Ghana's Popular Theatre Revival* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2011), 224–72.

makeup and incongruous costumes with oddball accoutrements and jokes that include ludicrous narratives, song parodies, and physical humor. Okala built his career by capturing the stratification of Ghanaian society and the frustrations and aspirations of the members of the rural working classes and the urban underclass that constitute the majority of his fans. He developed an iconic reputation among these groups. In seeking Okala's endorsement, the NDC was attempting to demonstrate Rawlings's affinity with these constituencies and his awareness of their political and economic concerns. However, given Okala's artistic signature of public indirection, crafty trickster maneuvers, and political satire, there was a great potential for ambivalence in how his endorsement of the president might be interpreted.

This article describes the conflict that emerged between the comic duplicity of the *gyimi* tradition and the unequivocal partisan support that the NDC sought from Okala. It argues that the skillful use of ambivalence, beyond being an essential character of performance, can also be a measure of the artistic efficacy and sociopolitical relevance of an artist. First, I detail the political and economic circumstances that compelled the NDC to seek Okala's endorsement. After his endorsement of Rawlings, Okala experienced harassment that he interpreted as threats to his person and his family, and he blamed Rawlings's political opposition. I show that beyond the physical danger Okala felt, the true danger was the risk to his career from the combined effect of the endorsement and the accusation Okala made against Rawlings's opposition. I point out that in Ghanaian culture, an artist's credibility and sociopolitical relevance is measured by his or her capacity to "speak to the wind"—to make such skillful use of the polysemy of speech and action that his or her meaning and intentions are always equivocal at some level. I maintain that Okala feared that his allegation against his purported harassers would be perceived as having placed him unequivocally on Rawlings's side and would thus be seen as a breach of the standards of artistic credibility and social relevance. Okala redressed this perception by reframing the performance in a tricksterlike gesture that inserted ambivalence into distinctions between private and public convictions and thus opened to question whether his statements had been subversive or supportive. My discussions offer fresh insights into Ghanaian popular theatre by addressing the implications of its engagement with electoral politics during the millennial decade.[3] They also provide what (to my knowledge) is the only substantial scholarly discussion of stand-up comedy in contemporary Africa.

## Game Changer: The VAT and the Kume Preko Demonstration

In 1995, three years into his first term as an elected president, Jerry Rawlings faced a major crisis of legitimacy in the wake of the Kume Preko demonstration against the VAT, a component of Ghana's neoliberal economic reforms. Rawlings had instituted the VAT as a deficit reduction measure to meet the expectation of international funding agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the late 1980s, international funding agencies began to dominate the direction and conduct of tax reforms in


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developing countries by making the implementation of such reforms conditions for loans.[4] In 1995, the tax reform "package" for Ghana entailed a replacement of older-style sales taxes with the VAT, which was chargeable at a 17.5 percent rate on goods and services. Although the World Bank and the IMF present tax reforms as a matter of revenue efficiency, taxation is a fundamentally political matter: it involves the distribution of benefits and burdens in ways that may not always be agreeable to all. Labor unions and other sections of the public attacked Ghana's VAT because it catapulted prices out of the reach of the poor.[5] The AFC called it a "gruesome policy measure" and wanted their protest to force more discussion about "ways of resolving the multi-dimensional problems of the poor."[6]

The Kume Preko demonstration over the VAT was a game changer. It enabled Rawlings's opposition to revitalize their ongoing contestation of his political legitimacy. It is important to clarify here that in 1981, before he was democratically elected president, Rawlings had taken over Ghana's government by staging a military coup and declaring a "revolution." Opposition groups slowly arose against his military regime. By 1985, the groups had joined together in a motley coalition of—broadly speaking—leftists and politicos. Politicos had long confronted Rawlings for violating liberal democratic principles but had failed to anchor their democratic ideals in a social project. Leftists, who had hoped for a socialist transformation under the military regime, considered Rawlings's neoliberal reforms to be a neocolonialist betrayal and adopted a liberal democratic stance only after their radical socialism gained little traction in the political discourse of the 1980s.[7] This opposition pressed for multiparty elections to return Ghana to liberal democratic rule. In 1991 Rawlings had agreed to the elections, and in 1992 he'd resigned from the army and run on the ticket of his newly formed National Democratic Congress to win the election. Rawlings became an elected president by outmaneuvering the opposition—by appropriating its discourse to redefine himself as a respecter of liberal democracy.

The Kume Preko demonstration gave opposition groups a fresh opportunity to combine forces. They opposed the VAT on two counts: first, that it was yet another example of Rawlings's betrayal of the poor and his capitulation to demands from international funding agencies for neoliberal, neoimperialist policies; and second, that the tax was an affront to liberal democracy because the regime had pushed this major revenue policy through a Parliament comprising essentially the ruling party's representatives without allowing significant debate, either in public or in Parliament. In the end, the implementation of the VAT and the violence against its protesters seriously tainted Rawlings's political legitimacy. In the face of the intense opposition of labor and the poor, Rawlings's claims that his regime was committed to political and economic justice suddenly seemed disingenuous. Furthermore, because of his regime's suspected hand in the Kume Preko fatalities, he could not easily insist on his commitment to the rule of liberal democratic law and the constitution. Napoleon Abdulai summed up the line of opposition by dedicating a booklet of essays written by founding members of the AFC to the "millions of Ghanaians who are taking to the streets against the hardships imposed by the IMF and the World Bank . . . and against the undemocratic regime."[8]



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## THE DRAMA OF LEGITIMATION: OKALA'S CAMPAIGN ENDORSEMENT IN THE "SHOW OF SUPPORT"

Ghana's 1996 presidential election campaign offered the incumbent Rawlings an opportunity to repair the dent that the VAT and Kume Preko had made in his populist image and his claims of support for liberal democracy. Whether leaders engage in proximal politics by enacting oneness and/or closeness with "the people" or construct a Manichaean divide that pits an "us" against an objectionable "them," their election campaigns are usually political dramas that seek to make participants feel that they are truly part of the political scene. Slogans, marches, flags, songs, and propaganda mark differences and similarities between individuals and groups in order to orchestrate a national theatre of democracy in which, by pointing to the spectacle of mass attendance, a candidate displays to potential voters that he or she has a large following.[9] As populist political drama and theatrical rituals of mass democracy, campaigns are "myth-making tools"—means by which a leader may construct narratives that affirm his or her political legitimacy.[10] As Rawlings campaigned for reelection, the NDC party grasped at such tools to shore up his populist and liberal democratic credentials and repair the damage to his claims of political legitimacy.

Rawlings found opportunity to construct narratives affirming his political legitimacy during the NDC convention, a series of events held on 6–7 September 1996 in the city of Sunyani to launch his presidential campaign. There were three aspects—"acts," if you will—to this drama of political legitimation. The "opening act" was Rawlings's reconstruction of his commitment to socioeconomic justice—a commitment that his VAT policy and the popular response to that policy, the Kume Preko demonstration, had put in doubt. It began on the morning of 6 September with his inauguration of a public service project. He cut the sod to mark the beginning of construction for the Sunyani Regional Hospital, a new and ultramodern 250-bed health facility that came with a price tag of £35 million.[11] Part of this opening act, his foreword to the new NDC manifesto released that same morning, committed the party to develop "disadvantaged areas and deprived sections of the society" and to recapture and build upon the "enthusiasm" that had fueled the "struggle for improved welfare for all" during Rawlings's revolution.[12] Rawlings's first act continued at about 10:00 A.M. the same day with the next event in the convention program—his acceptance-of-nomination speech at the party's National Delegates Congress held at Catholic Social Center in Sunyani. Part of Rawlings's speech followed this theme of continued commitment to a social project. He touted his record in providing health care and electricity, his "irrevocable commitment to uplifting the quality of life for the people," and his work to "prevent a few from using their wealth and education as a basis to claim power."[13]

Rawlings's second act began in another part of the same acceptance speech and entailed what I call legitimation by contrast. In that part of the speech, he held up his commitment to a socioeconomically just liberal democracy against what he characterized as the insensitivity, cynicism, and manipulativeness of his political opposition. He started by turning the skepticism of the opposition about the



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sincerity of his liberal politics on its head. He accused the opposition of "building a campaign of rumors, allegations and insinuations to manipulate the electoral process." He then contrasted the opposition's behavior with that of his regime, which he described as a successful agent of liberal democracy: "the first democratically elected government in the history" of Ghana "to have provided four years of uninterrupted constitutional stability."[14] Next, Rawlings dismissed the reactions of the opposition to his social projects as sheer envy:

> The opposition finds it painful to see the roads, the safe water, the schools and clinics, the hundreds of thousands of jobs created . . . and [much] more. They have even said . . . that providing electricity is cheap vote-catching. . . . In saying these things, they reveal their lack of concern for the people[,] especially those deprived sectors of the society who were for so long neglected and taken for granted.[15]

Here, Rawlings defended his "electricity politics" against the opposition's view that they were a calculated clientelist use of incumbency that sought to exchange services for votes. Political clientelism under most circumstances does more than merely ensure the delivery of goods and services. There often is a symbolic dimension to the exchange that works to construct a sense of belonging and collective identity that has the potential to create political legitimation for the benefactor.[16] Rawlings placed the opposition outside this collective identity and, in a feat of populist proximal politics, embraced his supporters as insiders—the "sectors of the society" who had long suffered and would not be "neglected" or "taken for granted" under his leadership.

I call the third act of Rawlings's campaign for legitimation the "show of support." Recall that in performance theory, performance is not only doing (behavior/action) but is also "showing doing"—"pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing" (*expressive* behavior/action).[17] In a press statement several days after the rally, Rawlings used the phrase "show of support" to refer to the action that his supporters had taken—their mass attendance—to display their solidarity both with him and the NDC.[18] However, I use the word "show" differently to drive home the idea that the party staged this spectacle of mass attendance to demonstrate that its social base and the support for its candidate were broad and inclusive.[19] The show comprised a mammoth rally at the tail of the convention. "[T]housands of party supporters arriving in the city on buses . . . trucks, tractors, on horsebacks and on foot, clad in party colors. . . paraded through the streets amidst drumming, singing and dancing" and extolled "the virtues of Jerry Rawlings and the NDC."[20] The crowd was so huge that some "had to climb trees and nearby houses" to see the proceedings. In calling the spectacle a "show" of support I have appropriated Rawlings's own language to emphasize a performance-centered view of political campaigns as political theatre/drama.

Just before Rawlings's speech at the rally, Ghana's ace stand-up comedian, Bob Okala, endorsed the incumbent president. Bishop Bob Okala's biography and celebrity status explain why the NDC chose him to endorse Rawlings in the spectacular third act of the drama of political legitimation. Okala was born Samuel



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Buabeng in 1961. He dropped out of school before completing his secondary education and decided to build a soccer career. He did well as a juvenile soccer player, but when a broken rib at the age of thirteen curtailed his soccer aspirations, he turned to baking to earn his living. In the early 1980s, he developed an interest in theatre and joined the Kusum Agoromma concert party troupe.[21] By the late 1980s, concert party activity had declined and Okala had left Kusum Agoromma. However, the birth of Rawlings's monumental social project, the National Theatre of Ghana, in 1992 and Rawlings's insistence on more socially inclusive theatre programming led in 1994 to a revival of concert party theatre that was staged live but, by 1995, was recorded for television with sponsorship from Key Soap, a brand-name product of the multinational company Unilever. Also in 1994, Buabeng heeded the National Theatre's call for performers and auditioned under the stage name Bishop Bob Okala. He was one of the first two comedians the theatre featured in the revival.[22]

Okala rapidly rose to fame in the National Theatre's Key Soap Concert Party Show, an ongoing fortnightly event. Promotional material and press reviews praised his comedy as "the best so far" and called him the "almighty" and "indomitable comedian" of the moment. In December 1995, he was one of three "master comedians" to appear in an event dubbed "the greatest of all concert party shows."[23] That same year he won the Arts Critics and Reviewers Association of Ghana's Best Comedian award. In August 1996, he was selected as a "distinguished individual of excellence" and performed at the National Festival of Arts and Culture.[24] Coterminous with Okala's rise to fame, stand-up comedy developed as an autonomous genre in Ghana. Before the revival of concert party theatre, Ghanaian comedians had mainly performed as comic relief characters in, or as warm-up acts for, concert party plays. However, when the National Theatre recognized that stand-up comedy appealed to the new audiences the revival of concert party theatre had generated, and that successful comedians had developed fan bases of their own, it began to bill stand-up comedy acts in their own right. Audiences called the genre *gyimi* (comic foolery) because of the buffoonery and slapstick antics in the comedians' routines. So successful was Okala's *gyimi* that the press described him variously as the "crowd puller," "the hottest comedian in town," and the "grand master of comedy."[25]

Rawlings (through the party) sought Okala's support because the comedian's modest origins, wide recognition, and National Theatre fame made him particularly suitable as an endorser. Okala was well placed to help Rawlings consolidate his image as a populist and an inclusive politician by signifying Rawlings's closeness to the rural working-class and urban underclass audiences for *gyimi*, from whom, according to Rawlings, the NDC party derived its strength. On the day he appeared at the rally, Okala stepped onto the platform wearing a flowing, light-colored shirt; a neck scarf in the red, white, and green, the colors of the NDC party; and a hat embossed with the party's emblem (Figure 1). With one arm raised he acknowledged the crowd; with the other, he waved a placard that read, "Vote NDC, Vote Rawlings." He then "showered praises" on President Rawlings "for building a National Theatre" where "people of humble birth" like Okala himself "could also appear and display comedy."[26]



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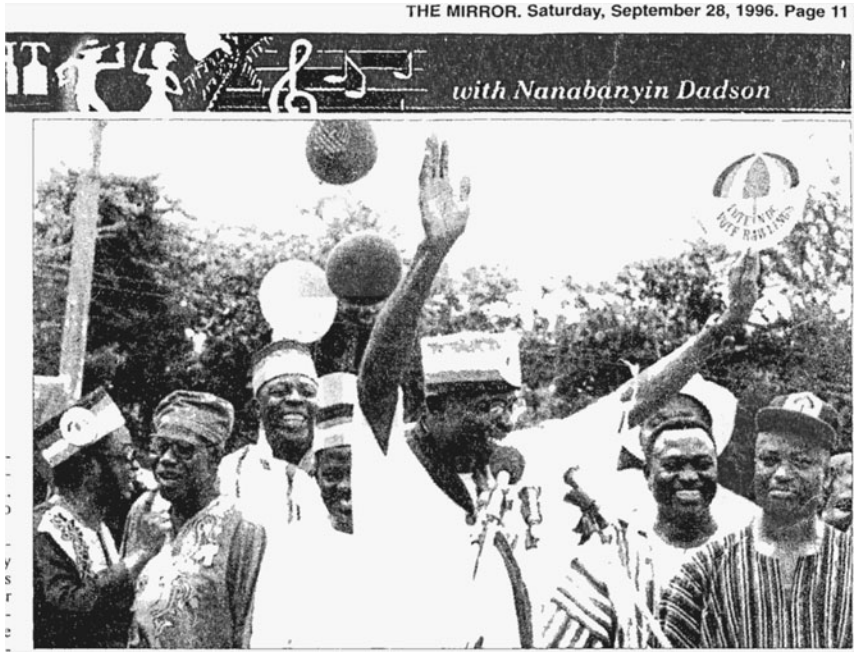


**Figure 1.**
Bob Okala "endorses" Rawlings at the NDC campaign rally. *Source*: Ghana News Agency, "Bob Okala: I'm Not in Politics," *The Mirror*, 28 September 1996, 11. Reprinted by permission from Graphic Communications Group.

## Speaking to the Wind: Polysemy, Artistic Sophistication, and Social Relevance

Shortly after the "show of support" at the NDC rally, Okala alleged in the press that he had been harassed for endorsing Rawlings:

> For two nights, thugs I suspect are members of the New Patriotic Party besieged my house at Kwadaso in Kumasi and tried to force their way into my room for mounting the platform [at the NDC rally]. . . . I had to flee from Kumasi to Accra. I have sent my wife and children to my hometown because we feel our lives are in danger.[27]

Three days later he spoke again to the press, saying that "the threats on his life by unidentified persons" had "totally disorganized him." This time he assured his "admirers" that "he had no leaning towards any particular party," that he was "not in politics," and that "his services are always ready for all."[28] Okala went on to explain that his endorsement of Rawlings "was at the invitation of the party" and that he was "paid the appropriate fee for the performance."[29] The allegation, partial


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retraction (the perpetrators of the harassment were no longer NPP "thugs" and were now "unidentified persons"), and the explanation (the endorsement was a paid "performance") prompted an article in the newspaper *The Mirror* titled "Is Okalla [*sic*] Finished?"[30]

In the *Mirror* article, arts and entertainment critic Nanabanyin Dadson wrote a lengthy attempt to make sense of Okala's partial retraction and explanation:

> It seems to me that besides providing entertainment, artistes are looked upon endearingly by society as a special group of people who are expected to be non-partisan, maintain credibility and be able to "speak for them" when necessary. This expectation . . . has been so high that anytime that any artiste . . . is seen to have turned into a praise-singer for people in power such members of society are pained and feel let down. . . . So where does that leave our popular artistes? How do they exercise their freedom to associate with a political party and at the same [time] maintain their credibility and popularity? I haven't got the answer but it appears to me that it is a can't-eat-your-cake-and-have-it situation; either they go it softly on their political leaning and maintain their following or go into politics head-on and "resign" their special status accorded them by society.[31]

For Dadson, the alleged harassment did more than present mortal danger to Okala; it was also the compelling reason behind the latter's explanation of his endorsement as "a performance" because it spotlighted an emerging impression after the rally that, by his actions there, he had breached social expectation: he had become a "praise singer for people in power." Fundamentally, Dadson's observations about the Okala affair are correct. But there is a complexity about what happened that Dadson loses by reducing the nature of the social breach to mere praise singing.

An Akan proverb says "as you speak to the wind you speak to God." This proverb helps illuminate the complexity of the social expectation that Dadson observes.[32] In this proverb, "God" represents centers of power and authority that must be addressed carefully, and speaking to the wind is a metaphor for the art of constructing polysemous speech. In Akan cultures, reverence for elders and for the seat of political authority calls for considerable self-restraint and the avoidance of open critical discourse before the face of power. Speaking to the wind serves this need for restraint; it is also a security measure that renders the meanings of expressions innocuous and masks their contentious meanings when the speaker encounters repressive and vindictive authorities.[33] The proverb thus emphasizes the artistry of negotiating the high stakes and potential crises of interaction and communication under the cover of polysemy. In such negotiation, the speaker is best served if his or her meaning and intent is equivocal and therefore debatable at one level or the other. Of course, speech can be polysemous (have coexisting multiple domains of meaning) without the speaker's agency when interpreters can associate more than one domain of meaning with the speech.[34] Whether or not the speaker to the wind actually wants to convey a contentious meaning—and we often do not know the answer to this question—he or she seeks a broad enough space of interpretation that any one explanation of his or her meaning and intention can be contested by at least one other meaning and intention.



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Speaking to the wind is not simply a "traditional" Akan value, however; it also has importance in Ghanaian popular culture today. The capacity to embody multiple meanings gives popular performing artists in Ghana room to represent multiple experiences and aspirations. This capacity, when combined with an ability to parade both contentious and innocuous action (including, but not limited to, speech acts), enables popular artists to provide cover for the voices of marginalized communities. Such cover does not have to be the artist's intent. If his (or her) suggestive symbols of expression are sufficiently ambivalent, their meanings—innocuous or otherwise—may be reinforced, transformed, or extended to articulate the vox populi and to represent or celebrate the sociopolitical status of marginalized peoples. The reliance of the Ghanaian public on the work of popular artists to express marginalized identities and aspirations makes speaking to the wind not just a hallmark of artistic sophistication but also the benchmark of an artist's social relevance.[35]

The career of musician Nana Kwame Ampadu, leader of a guitar-based "highlife" band, illustrates the connections between speaking to the wind, artistic sophistication, and social relevance in Ghanaian popular culture. Ampadu's political significance came to public notice in Ghanaian popular culture when he released a hit single titled "Ebi Te Yie" [Some are well seated]. The song tells the folktale about a meeting that all the animals attend to discuss their concerns. At the meeting, Leopard picks a seat behind Antelope and pins his tail to the ground with his paws. This prevents Antelope from taking the floor to contribute to the discussion. Exasperated, Antelope takes courage and petitions for an adjournment of the meeting because, "some are favorably positioned, others are not." Superficially, this is a sung tale about an animal world in which might and brute force prevail and smaller animals such as Antelope must contend with the predatory impulses of larger ones such as Leopard. In a deeper sense, of course, "Ebi Te Yie" is an allegory of a human world in which social injustice exists beneath "a veneer of peace and political order" (144).

Folklorist Kwesi Yankah explains Ampadu's allegory:

> Here, the democratic search for consensus within the decision-making process is quietly subverted by the . . . bullies, whose very legitimacy might be threatened by . . . equal rights, democracy, and free speech. It is a world of class distinctions where . . . opinion of the deprived is censured, and representative forums are mere tokens. The fragile antelope, already anguished by being orphaned, is brutally suppressed in his attempt to represent the views of the needy. (144)

The allegory depicts speaking to the wind as "a safe channel of protest by the politically endangered" (145). Antelope is able "to convey his agony without mentioning his tormentor" by seeking intervention "through a protest judiciously constructed with an impersonal pronoun" (145) to avoid confrontation with his censor. Furthermore, "te yie" is a lexically equivocal expression that facilitates Antelope's protest in the Akan language. The concept of being well seated conveys not just physical comfort but also the comforts of ill-gotten wealth, in contrast with the social deprivation of those who are not favorably positioned. The latter meaning links us to an alternative meaning—and use—of Ampadu's sung tale. Ampadu



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released this song in 1967 after a military regime overthrew Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah. This was a time of such widespread social injustice and illicit acquisition of wealth that Ghanaians adopted the song as an indirect "mode of political protest by the deprived" (145).

In 1982, Ampadu released another sung tale titled "Asem Beba Dabi" [There will be trouble someday]. In it, Tortoise warns other animals of the dangers of a prickly raffia palm tree on the bank of a river and asks them to join her in uprooting it. Tortoise's gesture is altruistic because her crusty exterior uniquely insulates her against prickly trees. The animals decline with several self-centered excuses. Fish cannot be bothered since it lives inside the river and has nothing to do with matters on the bank. Bird's priority is with matters in the sky. Antelope has other things to do. Thus, Tortoise abandons the project. Later, Man harvests the tree to make traps that catch Fish, Bird, and Antelope. Tortoise had not only selflessly warned them of impending danger but had also spoken to the wind. The danger of the tree was both its prickliness and the consequence, for the other animals, of human attraction to such a useful tree. Ampadu released this song after Rawlings's second military coup and claimed that it was a response to Rawlings's request that musicians "use their art to mobilize support for his revolution" (148). His explanation of the song is that Tortoise and his "wise counsel" represents Rawlings and his "vision of a problematic future if social evils were not immediately arrested" (149). However, in a twist of irony, many Ghanaians read "Asem Beba Dabi" as protest discourse. They reversed the metaphors to suggest that the prickly tree represented Rawlings's military dictatorship, that Rawlings posed a thorny problem for Ghanaians.

In 1992, Ampadu released "Oda Mo Do Yi Oda Wo Do" [A burden on me is a burden on you], another sung tale. It is about a king whose wife falls terminally ill. Power-hungry contesters for his throne exploit the situation by enacting a law that says that all widowers will be buried with their dead wives. The king agrees to the stipulation, but before he is buried, he cautions them that a burden on him is also a burden on them. Seeing his meaning, they stop his death and "withdraw the law, since some of their own wives are very prone to illness" (151). Ampadu asserts that the song, which was written around the time of Ghana's transition to liberal democracy, is a critique of the political opposition for scheming to disqualify Rawlings's candidacy for president legally "on the basis of his half-Scottish parentage" (151). However, in this case too, Ghanaians read the title "Oda Mo Do Yi Oda Wo Do" as a criticism of the government, an insinuation that government policies negatively targeted a segment of the population in a way that would "eventually. . . be a burden to all, including the policy-makers and their party members" (152).

The alternative interpretations of Ampadu's songs are all the more striking when one considers that his endorsements of Rawlings have been very public. His promotional jingles helped rally support for the NDC in the 1992 presidential campaign, and he has said of Rawlings: "I have admired him since the beginning of the revolution. He is a simple man who likes the rural folk and I like him for that" (151). Ampadu's career illustrates the connections among polysemy, artistic sophistication, and social relevance in Ghanaian popular culture and how they shape the delicate balance popular artists must find between their public personas and their private identities. Fans in Ghanaian popular culture do not automatically



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translate performers' endorsements of political figures as "selling out." The integrity and social relevance of a performer who has a history of artistic sophistication (i.e., is known for skill in the art of speaking to the wind), may remain intact after an endorsement because the latter may be perceived as having an alternative meaning (whether or not the meaning is specified)—unless there is something so unequivocal about it that it shatters the credulity typically offered such a performer. Ampadu's skillful speech to the wind in 1967 inaugurated his reputation as a sophisticated artist. By 1982, "Ebi Te Yie" and other songs had so consolidated this image that the meanings listeners made from "Asem Beba Dabi" and "Oda Mo Do Yi Oda Wo Do" were in direct tension with his public endorsements of Rawlings. As long as the suggestive symbols of Ampadu's sung tales maintained ambivalence, listeners found him to be relevant socially and politically, and they reinforced, transformed, and extended his tales for their own political purposes. Polysemy and the possibilities it offers for speaking to the wind were as central to Bishop Bob Okala's reputation for artistic sophistication and sociopolitical relevance as they were to Nana Kwame Ampadu's.

## Selling, Not Selling Out: Comedic Indirection and the Art of the Dubious Praise

Bishop Bob Okala's stage persona goes back to the "Bob" stock character that the concert party made famous in colonial Ghana. In the 1930s, Ishmael Johnson, the "Original Bob," created the character using Ananse, the trickster of Ghanaian folklore, as his prototype.[36] Like Ananse, Johnson's Bob had a big bulging stomach, "lived for his appetite and survived by his wit."[37] However, Johnson embellished Ananse with material from other sources, including blackface minstrelsy in the films of the American vaudevillian Al Jolson and the comedy sketches, foxtrots, and ragtime that African American seamen brought to Ghana's western seaboard in the 1920s.[38] Indeed, it is from these seamen that he got the name "Bob."[39] Johnson's Bob was a mischievous, pidgin-English-speaking, joke-cracking, buffoonish, domestic servant–cum–hanger-on who made trouble for his employers.[40] He wore "highly idiosyncratic makeup: He painted a white line down his nose, white circles on his cheeks, and a white rim around his lips." He also wore a tailcoat, "a scarf, . . . loose calico pantaloons," different-colored shoes, and "a long mustache that jutted out from his nose like whiskers on a cat."[41]

Bishop Bob Okala's comedic persona, like Bob Johnson's, is bricolage. It includes signs of his professional comedic lineage, his autobiography, and his creative idiosyncrasies as a comedian. The signs of his professional lineage include his name "Bob" and the white circles around his eyes and mouth, which are redesigns of the facial makeup that Ishmael Bob Johnson adapted from minstrelsy. Okala also wears a small wooden hourglass-shaped pestle (*tabori*) around his neck for a surrogate bow tie, as many a Bob has done. The name "Okala" is autobiographical and derives from his resemblance to a famous Nigerian goalkeeper of that name. He earned the nickname "Bishop," he says, because he likes to pray before any activity. Indeed, he often clutches a thick Bible-like


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book from which he makes outrageous quotations. Other autobiographical elements include soccer boots and socks and a baker's apron, representing the trades he dabbled in before pursuing comedy. The remaining elements are idiosyncratic comic oddballs. On his arms, he wears stockings that reach almost up to his lower biceps and make his fingers look like they are enclosed in misshapen mittens. He is usually bare-chested but wears two very long neckties that are made even stranger by their juxtaposition with his pestle bow tie and the fact that he pins them to his waist with a belt (see Figure 3). He typically wears a bandana but sometimes replaces it with a baseball cap worn front to back, or a hat that looks partly like a Turkish fez and partly like a bishop's miter. Okala's trademark accessory is his "wrist-clock"—a large wall clock that he wears on his wrist.

Bishop Bob Okala provokes laughter merely by sporting apparel and accoutrements that juxtapose the usual with the exaggerated and the misfit with the norm. He skillfully uses deadpan, and his "lugubrious and contrasting solemnity" often makes him "seem all the funnier [*sic*] to an audience already delighted by the joke."[42] Okala's ensemble of hodgepodge apparel and trappings and the hilariously grotesque figure that he cuts with them—including a deadpan face made funnier by the makeup he wears—allows him to reach comedic heights. His very appearance generates such huge laughter in his audiences before he even says a word that he seems "justified in asking, 'What did I do?'"[43] By asking the question, Okala shifts responsibility for the laughter from himself to his audience with an ironic subtext: "I am serious, so what are you laughing at?" Okala's comedic persona is loaded with such a multiplicity of signifiers and possible meanings that he himself is the epitome of speaking to the wind.

Okala's embodiment of multiple meanings is also evident in his joke routines. For instance, following his return from Canada on a prize trip taken in October 2000 that was sponsored by Unilever, he staged a routine in which he flaunted what he called his "improved" looks.

> I do look good—I have gained weight. Well, thank you, and thanks to Key Soap. You know? That is what traveling abroad is like. When you travel abroad and you do not gain anything at all, rest assured you will gain weight.[44]

This routine plays on perceptions of Europe and North America as places of affluence and invigorates his audiences' longing for the "good life" there. Without the means to visit, they experience the tour abroad vicariously through the comedian. He is a man of humble birth just as they are, and he represents the possibilities of their fantasy. Unilever and Key Soap become benefactors of the entire audience for sponsoring Okala on this "prized" trip so that the audience can "partake" in his experience. However, his grotesque appearance so contradicts his claim to good looks that someone in the audience laughs. Challenged, Okala "proves" his claim by turning around to reveal his padded, oversized backside. The audience is both repulsed and delighted: here is their crafty comedian of humble birth whose skills have gained him fame and earned him a coveted prize, yet somehow he is also the grotesque figure whose appearance is nothing they desire to have. By the end of the routine Okala has both stoked and undermined their


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fantasy images of life abroad. In addition, he has both praised Key Soap and undercut that praise: if all he gained on his trip is a grotesquely enlarged backside, then perhaps Key Soap and its producers are not benefactors after all.

Okala intersperses his routines with comic song parodies. Like most concert party comedians, he arouses the sentiment and feelings of his audience through song.[45] Often Okala's songs capture the socioeconomic circumstances of the production, circulation, and consumption of Unilever's Key Soap. One of Okala's songs parodies a popular highlife song as follows:

> When we were courting we bathed with Key Soap.
> When we were newlyweds we bathed with Key Soap.
> How come we now wash with *alata* soap!
> You have reduced me to disgrace
> I know we can't afford expensive soap
> But *alata* soap is something I cannot bear![46]

The parody is about a couple's loss of status when financial problems compel them to switch from the brand-name Key Soap to a less prestigious, homemade *alata* soap that has no brand. On the one hand, the song praises Unilever's Key Soap as a passport to social status and marital fulfillment. On the other hand, it comments on the socioeconomic impact of commodity fetishism when both a brand-name soap and a generic one assume social meanings that are not necessarily commensurate with their "absolute utility."[47]

Okala's song about the couple ends with a commentary on the soap market in Ghana. At the time Okala was performing this routine, two paragraphs in Unilever's contract with its soap distributors barred a wide range of people associated with a distributor from "buying or selling products or from showing direct or indirect interest" as "principal, agent, promoter, director, partner, employee, shareholder or whatever nomenclature" with any company that trades in products that are similar to Unilever's. Those who were affected by these clauses included the distributor's spouse or spouses, any children of the distributor under the age of twenty-one, and any person or persons whom the distributor managed, controlled, or employed. Local soap makers and other small business entities saw Unilever's stipulations, which it made only in contracts with Ghanaian distributors, as "an attempt by a Goliath with interests spanning the globe" to overly determine the market by destroying "small and medium scale indigenous enterprises" ("the Davids" of the economy) in order to gain an "unearned monopoly in Ghana." They accused Unilever of an "unfair trade practice" that violated the "contractual and fundamental rights of individuals."[48]

In Okala's refrain, he offers a brief but profound commentary on the cutthroat competition that has raised questions about the fairness of trade practices in Ghana's soap market.

> You think you can beat Key Soap?
> Soap people forget it!
> You arrange your soap at dawn
> It is still displayed at night![49]



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The refrain is a commentary on the power of finance capital and the competitive edge it gives a giant multinational such as Unilever in Ghana's soap market. It celebrates the dominance of Unilever's Key Soap in Ghana's soap market, yet it makes a political and economic critique with which Okala's audience identifies. For Ghana's urban underclass, many of whom eke out a living in Ghana's informal economy selling different kinds of soap, the image of setting up shop from dawn to dusk without selling anything is familiar. The refrain's happy melody and Okala's humorous head-bobbing antics cover—but hardly obscure—the picture of struggling soap peddlers denied a living by the unmatchable capital and marketing prowess of the big multinational company.

Bishop Bob Okala's routines offer the juxtaposition of antithetical elements: texts that both legitimize and undermine, texts whose mutual illogicality confounds attempts to interpret them either in ways that are completely supportive of powerful entities or in ways that are purely subversive. At the basic level, the "arts of political disguise" might be divided into two categories: "those that disguise the message," such that it is "too ambiguous to be actionable by authorities," and "those that disguise the messenger."[50] Okala clearly fits both of these two basic categories, for in his case the messenger embodies multiple meanings prior to any polysemous utterance he makes onstage. In a dizzying feat of verbal and nonverbal modes of speaking to the wind, in which both message and messenger are full of ambivalence, Okala praises Key Soap in a way that both eulogizes and undercuts the value of the brand-name product of his multinational corporate sponsors, accomplishing this complex feat under Unilever's imposing surveillance.

Okala's routines bring into sharp focus the lexical ambivalence of the verb "sell," which denotes both promotion and duplicity. According to Kwesi Yankah, when Okala endorsed Rawlings at the rally dressed in NDC garb but under his stage name Bishop Bob Okala, he was "doing for the umbrella [NDC party] what he does for key soap [*sic*]—*sell it*."[51] No stranger to Ghanaian modes of speaking to the wind himself, Yankah hints that Okala merely transformed the target of his dubious praise; instead of "selling" the Key Soap brand, he was "selling" Rawlings as a populist liberal democrat. In other words, Yankah suggests, he had moved from the politics of popular theatre to the theatre of populist politics, where his endorsement could be also be interpreted as both eulogizing and undercutting the incumbent candidate and his party. There are bases on which to agree with Yankah. On the one hand, at the rally Okala invoked his personal life—his humble birth and his rise to fame as a household name—in a way that suggests he was presenting himself as an everyday person and not his comedic stage persona. On the other hand, he appeared under his stage name—a factor that places his endorsement in the mouth of his stage persona. What is more, biographical signifiers are so intricately woven into the fabric of his stage persona that it is fair to expect some observers of the endorsement, which he made under his stage name, to see it as the polysemous persona in action despite his invocation of his personal life. Therefore, like Ampadu's, Okala's credibility and social relevance had every chance of remaining intact even after his endorsement.

If Okala's praise singing for Rawlings and the NDC was by itself not a breach of the social expectation, then why did he feel compelled to (re)frame his


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endorsement as "a performance"? (In fact, the spate of physical attacks associated with interparty antagonism at the time suggests that the alleged harassment was more likely the result of politically motivated thuggery than a response to the social breach.) What was it that he feared had aligned his political affiliation so unequivocally with Rawlings that it put his credibility, his relevance, and his career at risk?

## Mouths Be Gun: Fighting Words, the Partisan Mark, and the Interplay of Significations

If Okala's endorsement was by itself not a breach of the social expectation, since it remained possible to read it as an extension of his typical ambivalence on the concert party stage, his subsequent allegation that NPP "thugs" had harassed him was a different matter. In the Ghana of the 1990s, the word "thug" had become a politically partisan pejorative. Reports of political thuggery appeared almost daily in the opposition press, accusing Rawlings's supporters of violent acts and insinuating that Rawlings had dictatorial tendencies and was not a legitimate political leader.[52] In May 1995, the opposition's description of those who attacked the Kume Preko demonstrators as "hired thugs of the regime" brought the term "thug" to greater focus and increased its political valence. Thus, Okala's use of the word "thug" marshaled a fighting word against the opposition in the contest over Rawlings's political legitimacy, whether he intended that interpretation or not.

Feeling the force of Okala's words, the secretary-general of the NPP responded by maintaining that his party was "disciplined" and "anchored on democratic principles and virtues"; that it respected different opinions and beliefs; and that it "would do nothing to subvert" freedom of association or "countenance any act from its supporters that infringe the law, rights and liberties of other Ghanaians."[53] *The Statesman*, the NPP's allied newspaper, maintained that "the NPP is a party built on the foundation of democracy where tolerance and respect for divergent views are the basic tenet"[54] Both the secretary-general and *The Statesman* questioned Okala's credibility. The former refused to take his allegation seriously "in the absence of material evidence showing that such harassments were indeed carried out by NPP supporters." The latter called Okala an "NDC clown . . . crying wolf to obtain favors from the NDC government."[55] It claimed that although Okala had declared himself persona non grata in Kumasi, he had appeared at a radio station in that city the day after the press published his allegation. Furthermore, it questioned why Okala had not made a report to the Kwadaso police and challenged him to prove the allegation.

Whether or not Okala's allegation was true, his use of the highly charged signifier "thug" put him in far greater jeopardy than his endorsement did. His endorsement of Rawlings at the rally may have been consistent with the ambivalence of his stage persona, but his allegation of thuggery could hardly escape implications of partisan, political combativeness. Immediately below *The Statesman*'s response to Okala's allegation, a cartoon by Zingaro captured the combative force of highly charged speech in Ghana's political arena, underscoring the view that words spoken in a polarized political context are as dangerous as lethal weapons (Figure 2). Politics



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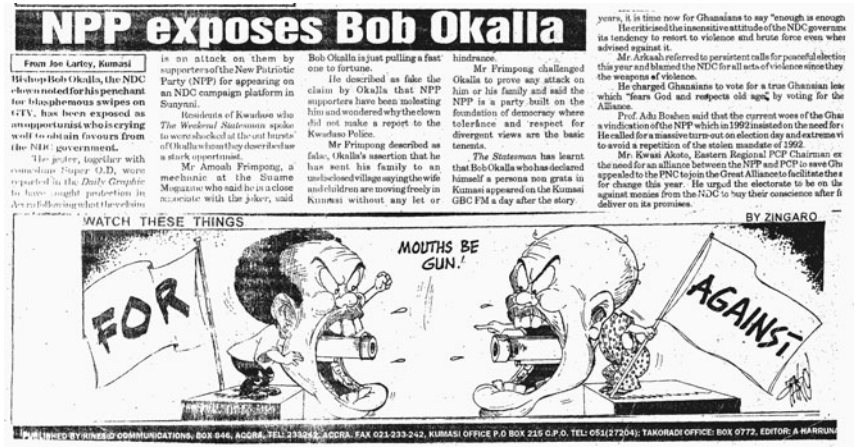


**Figure 2.**

Zingaro's cartoon "Mouths Be Gun!" illustrates how spoken words can become weapons in public discourse. *Source*: *The Statesman*, 26 September 1996, 1. Reprinted by permission from the editor, Kwabena Amankwah.

divides people so heatedly into those "FOR" or "AGAINST" a party and/or its candidate that (in West African pidgin English) "MOUTHS BE GUN!"[56]

By shooting at the opposition with his mouth, Okala shot himself in the foot. Outside the festive theatricality of the political rally and in the thick of the debate about Rawlings's political legitimacy, his allegation against the political opposition constrained the range of possible interpretations for his endorsement, turning what could otherwise have been considered an extension of the well-known ambivalence he cultivated on the concert stage into something more unequivocally partisan. This was a career-threatening move that tainted the artist's credibility and the social and political relevance he had created for himself. The sense of unequivocal partisanship in Okala's allegation threatened to strip him retroactively of the polysemy of suggestive symbols under which his fans of varying political persuasions could seek cover. The fact that he addressed his partial retraction to his "admirers"—fans who were likely to be offended by his unequivocal support—discloses the significance of this threat. More important, Okala retracted the charge of thuggery: his harassers became "unidentified persons."

## THE BISHOP'S SOCIAL GOSPEL: PARODY, AMBIVALENCE, AND THE "BIBLE THAT IS NOT A BIBLE"

Okala's explanation was not a simple declaration of an apolitical stance. It was a career-saving move to restore ambivalence to his endorsement in order to regain his artistic credibility and relevance. It reinvoked the ambivalence of his stage persona so he could escape the taint of unequivocal partisanship and reassure

fans of his artistic sophistication and social relevance without having to retract the endorsement. This was not a particularly new tactic for Okala, who is no stranger to highly public controversy. For example, earlier in 1996, his penchant for parodying church songs had generated allegations of blasphemy from some members of his television audience. Okala's response to the blasphemy charges was a form of indirection—a rhetorical doubleness that invoked his stage persona's ambivalence as a reassuring signal to his live theatre audiences that he was still their artistically sophisticated and socially relevant comedian.

Okala was called a blasphemer because he exploited the form and foibles of the Christian church for comedy. Indeed, in addition to dubiously praising Unilever and Key Soap, parodying church music and liturgy is another forte of his. One such parody in his repertoire captures the difficult living conditions of members of Ghana's poor urban underclass, whose frustrations with thieving animals, the lyrics indicate, test a poor person's patience as well as his or her piety.

> One Sunday morning, I made some soup
> And left it to simmer on the fire.
> A goat walked in and knocked it empty
> I picked up a big stick and walloped it on the head, "po"!
> Brethren, what is my sin?
> *[Audience cheers]*[57]

The song is an allusion to a heightened disbelief in coincidence that renders "the material world . . . incapable of explaining the totality of human experience."[58] In this allusion, the goat is a God-sent chastisement for the hungry protagonist's concern with eating on a Sunday morning instead of attending church. Feeling unfairly trapped between earthly needs and heavenly aspirations, the protagonist requests a fair judgment of his moral dilemma about whether and when the spirit must give way to the flesh.

Okala completes the routine with a rousing parody that he calls the "Glass and Bottle Church." This is a risqué reworking that replaces the name of God in a popular Christian praise song with that of well-known brands of alcohol. At the end of this song the audience joins Okala to declare the "excellence" of *akpeteshie*, a cheap but potent homegrown alcoholic brew made from palm wine or sugar cane juice.

> OKALA: Star, you're so good Malt, you are kind Guinness, you are wonderful *Akpeteshie* you are . . .
> AUDIENCE: Excellent![59]

This parody underscores the relationships among alcohol, class, and power in Ghana. Alcohol consumption has been an integral part of Ghanaian social practices since colonialism, and its links to power have persisted unbroken into the present, despite the influence of Christianity. In colonial times, young men challenged the authority of chiefs and elders by flaunting their access to alcohol, an item that was considered the prerogative of those chiefs and elders. The increasing availability of locally distilled *akpeteshie* adversely affected the colonial government's revenue

from imported liquor, and the government defined it as illicit in the restrictive liquor laws of 1930, vigorously prosecuting patrons of the drink. However, *akpeteshie* survived this government onslaught, and around the time of World War II, distillation of the home brew proliferated as the demand for inexpensive liquor rose. *Akpeteshie* became associated with urban popular culture and social protest.

After Ghana's independence in 1957, new configurations of class and social inequality brought about new drinking patterns. "Johnny Walker and Haig whiskies signified the superior status of the new political elite, and lager beer the comfortable position of the middle class," whereas "*akpeteshie* became the symbol of working-class poverty and discontent."[60] After 1966, acute economic decline made conditions for workers very bad, and medical doctors "began to highlight evidence of the rising incidence of alcoholism." Those with "socioeconomic disabilities sometimes drifted into chronic drinking," redefining themselves as "socially incapable."[61] The ambivalence of Okala's parody emerges against this social history. At one level the song celebrates his audience as members of the urban working class and underclass. At another level it draws attention to their poverty and dissatisfaction by signifying social stratification with different drinks that are clearly marked by class.

In January 1996, a reader named Nana Ewusi wrote to the *Ghanaian Chronicle* to complain about Okala's parodies. His letter, titled "Stop 'Bishop' Okalla TV Show," said:

> This so called "Bishop" Bob Okalla [*sic*] uses the Holy Bible to ridicule men of God during his concert party show, which is telecast regularly on GTV. This man appears on TV wearing a priest's cassock, holding the Bible and sometimes the cross. He ridicules pastors and says profane things as quotations from the Bible. . . . I hope the organizers of the Concert Party Show will . . . stop this comedian from using his show to offend many Christians.[62]

Six weeks later, another viewer, Clarence Coleman, wrote to *The Mirror* to protest an Okala parody he had seen on television. Coleman was unhappy about the fact that while imitating a clergyman, Okala had led the audience to respond to the comedian's "Praise the Lord" call with "Onyame ahu wo," an Akan phrase that means "God is aware of your deeds," instead of with "Hallelujah."[63] He denounced Okala's "imitation of the holy [B]ible and the quotations he purported to make from it" and declared that it was "high time that . . . religious leaders, especially Christian ones, stood up to condemn" such "negative tendencies . . . gaining prominence" in Ghanaian society.[64]

The charges of Coleman and Ewusi underscore the new challenge Okala faced as his ambivalent persona and performances reached a broader section of Ghanaian society through television. Okala had crafted his comedy to appeal primarily to live theatre audiences comprised mostly of members of the urban underclass. This audience, though largely sympathetic to Christianity, recognized their experiences and frustrations as Okala rendered them in the discrepancies between the parody and the original liturgy. Thus, Okala retained entertainment value and social relevance for them even though he used the Church as grist for his comedy



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mill. For this constituency, which battled material deprivation every day, Okala's parodic unsettling of the boundaries between spiritual and corporeal experience had tremendous resonance as a comical but relevant sermon about everyday life. However, when television brought Okala's performance to a more heterogeneous audience, including a powerful constituency of Christians with different social backgrounds than those of Okala's live theatre audiences, some members of this new audience responded to the perceived sacrilege rather than to the social significance of his comedy. Okala's response to Coleman and Ewusi's charges marked an astute recognition of the new social force he faced and the quandary that his comedy routines had created for him when they were mediated through television.

Bishop Bob Okala responded to the protests against his parodies of church songs and liturgies in an interview with *The Mirror*, published as a full-page article in its arts and entertainment column. It offered a profile of Okala that emphasized his humble beginnings and his rise to fame, mentioned his membership in the Christ Believers Church, and explained how the comedian acquired his stage name "Bishop." In the article Okala acknowledged the "continuous support" he enjoyed from his fans and thanked them and asked that "they continue to pray" for him. The article noted that Okala's "Bible act has lately elicited some criticism from his Christian fans" and gave the comedian a platform for responding:

> I am greatly disturbed by those who accuse me in recent times of being blasphemous in my shows. Let me say first and foremost that I use names from the Bible only for the show and have no intention of blaspheming. God is my strength in whatever I do and there is no way I'd turn my back and ridicule my benefactor. What you see me holding on stage is just an ordinary book and not a Bible, as many believe. . . . I just mean to entertain and it is unfortunate my intentions are misconstrued.[65]

Okala's statement posited a difference—a mimetic gap, if you will—between the acts and items of his routines and those of Christian liturgy: what he holds onstage, he said, is not an actual Bible. The statement declared a difference between his actual religious convictions and the staged irreverence of his comedic persona. However, on another level, it admitted to a mimetic correspondence between the acts and items of his routine and those of Christian worship. The names he used in his routines are "from the Bible," and the book he holds does *look* like a Bible. In the article, the juxtaposition of two images of him, one of his ordinary-looking and purportedly "God fearing" self and another of his grotesque-looking stage persona, underscores both the difference and the correspondence (Figure 3).[66] The result is an ambivalence that, as Margaret Rose defines the concept, is the very essence of parody.

> Both by definition (through the meaning of its prefix 'para') and structurally (through the inclusion within its own structure of the work it parodies), most parody worthy of its name is ambivalent towards its target. This ambivalence may entail not only a mixture of criticism and sympathy for the parodied text, but also the creative expansion of it into something new.[67]



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THE MIRROR. Saturday, April 20, 1996. Page 11

AINMENT with Nanabanyin Dadson

KALLA TAGE

heatre next Saturday

at home.

Okalla's act has been very simple. He always steps on stage seemingly making no effort to create laughter yet creating such huge side splitters among his audiences that he is justified in asking "what did I do?"

His familiar costume has been a baseball cap worn front-to-back, a pair of glass-less spectacles, two flying ties and a "tapori" for a bow tie, a cook's apron over a long shirt and trousers and a clock for a wrist watch. He carries a book that may pass for a Bible and wears football hoses and a pair of boots.

On a typical performance day, he would walk onto stage stealthily and then break into song: *Fufu o fufu o, yeah* in the style of Ras Kimono's *Under Pressure*.

Then when the singing is finished, Okalla would go into his "osofo" mode and play around with Bible

The ACRAG 1995 Best Comedian says he owes a lot to Mr William Addo, Auntie Ama and Sister Anastasia who he describe as motivators who have kept him going in his job.

The 35-year-old married entertainer, who hails from Akyem Oda — Anoo (Old Town), is known in private life as Kwadwo Buabeng and has plans concerning his career.

"I intend to travel abroad to learn some more and would be happy if I could

• *On stage Okalla wears a baseball cap front-to-back, two flying ties and "tapori" for a bow tie. Then armed with a clock for a wrist watch, he steps up*

**Figure 3.**

*The Mirror*'s profile of Bob Okala shows him both in "ordinary garb" and in his stage apparel. *Source*: Michael Crabbe, "Bob Okalla [*sic*] on Stage," *The Mirror*, 20 April 1996, 11. Reprinted by permission from Graphic Communications Group, Ghana.

Although, as I discussed earlier, reverence for elders and for the seat of authority is the context of potential crises in the high-stakes communication of traditional Akan cultures, Okala's quandary shows that the surveillance of multinational corporate sponsors and growing religious sensitivities presented different contexts, but similar crises and stakes, in the Key Soap Concert Party



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Show. If we are to understand his response to the quandary as an indication of the measure of sophistication and social relevance of the show, then such sophistication and relevance derived not only from the humor of the jokes or the ambivalence of Okala's or another comedian's presentation but also in the artistry with which, under the cover of polysemy, they negotiated any crises the jokes produced—in their capacity under such crises, to retain equivocality about their meaning and intention or, as it were, to reposition their speech in the wind. By drawing attention to the parodic ambivalence of his stage acts—to the coexistence of both correspondence and difference between his ordinary person and the liturgy-mimicking persona he presents "only for the show," Okala made a move to reassert his artistic sophistication.

## Theorizing Tactics: Private Views, Public Expression, and the Politricks of Speaking to the Wind

What, then, is the parallel between Okala's response to the accusation of blasphemy and what he said to the press to remove the taint of political partisanship after his allegation of thuggery? By stating that "he is not in politics," that his services "are for all," and that "he was paid the appropriate fee for the performance,"[68] Okala defined his endorsement as a commercial gig, thus alluding to his professional identity as a comedian and discouraging unequivocal association between his public endorsement of Rawlings and his private feelings about the regime. As with his response to the charges of blasphemy, he denied any other intention behind his actions and utterances than a professional provision of entertainment. In other words, his seeming endorsement, like his use of a book that looks like a Bible, was "only for the show." But the reality in both instances is that there was both correspondence and difference between the stage persona and the person. Thus, in the explanation for the endorsement (as in that for the parody), what remains is an ambivalence about any difference or correspondence between the persona his fans might have seen endorsing Rawlings at the rally and his actual person, who, he suggested, might have different political opinions from that of his persona.

Okala's tactics for dealing with the popular expectation that artists "speak to the wind" reveal him as the embodiment of a trickster. Like trickster figurers, he delightfully but dangerously plays with ambivalence in order to negotiate deftly in different realms—social, religious, artistic, political, and economic—and does so in a way that both espouses and subverts certain points of view. His antics in this regard bring to mind another Akan proverb that advises, "When you craft a lie, craft one with an 'opening' such that when you are caught you will have a space for escape." Like "hoax"—or even "sell"—the verb "lie" in this context signifies creativity, invention, and imagination, similar to the way the verb is used in African American linguistics.[69] It captures what Joyce Jonas refers to as the trickster's singular "ability to extricate himself" from "tight situations," an ability that lies in his "gift with words": his "talent for spinning yarns," or, as the Akan would have it, his ingenuity in crafting a lie with an opening.[70] Okala's retroactive framing of his NDC appearance as a paid performance gave an opening that would


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discourage unequivocal readings of his endorsement. At the same time, by highlighting his ambivalence, the gesture alerted his audiences that his utterances and actions, both on and off any stage, should not be read in unequivocal terms.

Even though the ruling party appropriated his comedic persona in its efforts to restore its political legitimacy, and even though he used forceful rhetoric in his allegation that the political opposition engaged in thuggery in response to his performance, Okala emerged as a trickster whose *politricks*—tricksterlike play that uses indirection—allow him to navigate the minefields of social expectations and unpredictable interpretations. Tricksters define "the lines of force binding society" even as they challenge those very lines by "break[ing] the connections assumed to exist between what is said, what is done, and what is meant."[71] Delightful and grotesque, subversive and deferential, Okala challenges by rendering ambivalent the constructed boundaries of the sociopolitical economic order: the boundaries between "good" and "bad" soap, between piety and the daily demands of corporeality, between sacred worship and the comic delight of parody, between liberal democratic ideals and popular cultural values, between political legitimacy and political illegitimacy, and between the politics of theatre and the theatre of politics.

Okala's ambivalence both on the National Theatre stage and at the NDC rally is consistent with certain ideas of performance theory. This idea contests any sharp distinction between a "real" world of human behavior and an "imaginary" domain of performance. It proposes that viewing behavior in mimetic terms—as a signifying image—does not eliminate an ongoing awareness of the behavior in a "real" world, nor does viewing the behavior as part of everyday reality strip it of its mimetic signification. Performance, or what Schechner calls "restored behavior," is neither totally real nor completely mimetic; instead, it shares aspects of both the real and the mimetic such that mimesis and reality coexist in a continual, unresolved, and dialectical tension.[72] Along these lines, Schechner conceptualizes a form of double consciousness where an ambivalent "'not themselves' and 'not not themselves'" quality is the essential characteristic of every performer across the wide spectrum of what may be called performance.[73] Thus, from the point of view of performance theory, a conceptual kinship links Okala's comedy to Rawlings's three acts of political legitimation. Each was "make-belief", a construction of social reality, an imaginative presentation that blurred presumed differences between the imagined and real selves of the performers.[74] The two performers' ends were different, though. One worked to express artistic sophistication and relevance, the other to demonstrate his credentials as a liberal democratic man of the people.

This brings me to my final point. Performance theory recognizes the futility of looking for an objective reality outside performance and instead emphasizes what the inherent dialectical tensions of performance produce: a "certain kind of *actual*" for those who experience it.[75] Schechner specifies this "actual" as a threshold crossing—a transformational and sometimes unsettling experience of a consequential act and/or of something at stake when the double consciousness of performance activates particular feelings or awareness among its participants in a concrete space.[76] When Rawlings's and Okala's performances are understood in



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terms of the feelings or awareness they activated, Rawlings's three acts contrast with Okala's comedy in a significant way. Because electoral candidates such as Rawlings suggest that their public images are reflections of their core beliefs, any perceived differences between their public images and their personal beliefs may damage their political legitimacy, as many a political gaffe and personal scandal has demonstrated. But in Ghana, the expectations of artists are different from those for electoral candidates. Okala had to "speak to the wind" so that his private beliefs would not be so evident as to undermine his artistic credibility, especially when mediating circumstances raised doubts about this credibility: when television cast his parodies as ridiculing Christianity and his highly charged allegation framed his endorsement as unequivocal support for Rawlings. If performance theory discloses the "not me . . . not not me" quality as the essential character of performance,[77] Okala's predicament shows that there are social and cultural contexts in which such ambivalence is a measure of the efficacy and relevance of a performance.

## ENDNOTES

1. Alliance for Change, "The Killers of May 11 Are Still at Large," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 7–10 September 1995, 6.

2. Kwesi Intsuah, "Hitlerism in Ghana," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 18–21 May 1995, 5.

3. By "millennial decade," I mean the period 1990–2000, the decade leading to the millennium transition. In Ghana, this decade combined the most radical economic liberalization in the country's history with the most sustained liberal-democratic electoral politics since independence in 1957. However, it is rarely represented in studies of Ghanaian popular theatre. With perhaps one exception (Jesse Weaver Shipley, "The Best Tradition Goes On: Audience Consumption and the Transformation of Popular Theatre in Neoliberal Ghana," in *Producing African Futures: Ritual and Reproduction in a Neoliberal Age*, ed. Brad Weiss [Boston: Brill], 106–40), the historical scope of much of what has been published about Ghanaian popular theatre is no more recent than the 1980s. For examples, see Catherine M. Cole, *Ghana Concert Party Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Kwabena N. Bame, *Come to Laugh: African Traditional Theatre in Ghana* (New York: Lillian Barber Press, 1985); and John Collins, "The Jaguar Jokers and *Orphan Do Not Glance*," in Karin Barber, John Collins, and Alain Ricard, *West African Popular Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 56–116.

4. Miranda Stewart and Sunita Jogarajan, "The International Monetary Fund and Tax Reform," *British Tax Review* 2 (2004): 146–75. For discussions of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the World Bank and IMF in Africa see Bonnie Campbell and John Loxley, ed. *Strutural Adjustment in Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989); Kamari Clarke, *Fictions of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 78–9; Peter Gibbon, Yusuf Bangura and Arve Ofstad, ed. *Authoritarianism, Democracy and Adjustment* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1992); and Thandika Mkandawire and Charles Soludo, *Our Continent Our Future: African Perspectives on Structural Adjustment* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1999).

5. Kwame Danso, "VAT Has Failed Hopelessly," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 11–14 May 1995, 2; "Hear the Workers Cry, Mr. President," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 24–6 April 1995, 5; Douglas Akwasi Owusu, "Workers Disrupt May Day," *Ghanaian Times*, 2 May 1995, 1; Nathan Samwini, "VAT: The Mother of All Killer Policies," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 24–6 April 1995, 4; "VAT Takes Off Today," *Ghanaian Times*, 1 March 1995, 1.

6. Adwoa Safo, "Kume Preko March Is On Today," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 11–14 May 1995, 12.

7. Zaya Yeebo captures the leftists' feeling of betrayal extensively in *Ghana: The Struggle for Popular Power* (London: New Beacon Books, 1992). For a discussion of the political coalition that opposed Rawlings, see Jeff Haynes, "Ghana: From Personalist to Democratic Rule," in *Democracy and Political Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, ed. John A. Wiseman (New York: Routledge, 1995), 92–115, at 96–97; Kwesi Jonah, "Political Parties and the Transition to Multi-Party Politics in Ghana," in *Ghana: Transition to Democracy*, ed. Kwame A. Ninsin (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1998), 83–108, at 91–98; and Mike Oquaye, *Politics in Ghana, 1982–1992: Rawlings, Revolution, and Populist Democracy* (Accra: Tornado, and New Delhi: Thomson Press India, 2004), 297–357. For an explanation of the extraordinary way that Rawlings's regime pushed the VAT bill through the Ghanaian Parliament, see Philip D. Osei, "Political Liberalisation and the Implementation of Value Added Tax in Ghana," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 38.2 (2000): 255–78, at 263–6.

8. Napoleon Abdulai, *Ghana: The Kume Preko Demonstrations—Poverty, Corruption & the Rawlings Dictatorship* (London: Africa Research & Information Bureau, 1995), 11.

9. Carlos de la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America,* 2d ed. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 88. The link between political legitimation and performance can be found in the manipulation of public symbols. Leaders manipulate, appropriate, and refashion symbols—or create completely new ones—to urge subjects to act in desired ways. See Abner Cohen, *The Politics of Elite Culture: Explorations in the Dramaturgy of Power in a Modern African Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Donald V. Kurtz, *Political Anthropology: Paradigms and Power* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 35–6; and Richard M. Merelman, "The Dramaturgy of Politics," *Sociological Quarterly* 10.2 (1969): 216–41, at 216. Constructing, using, and/or revising political symbols is creative work—a "dramaturgy of politics," as Merelman calls it. This suggests that the study of politics can benefit from insights from performance and aesthetic theory. See Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana–Champaign: University of Illinois Press, [1964] 1985), 11; and William F. S. Miles, "The Rally as Ritual: Dramaturgical Politics in Nigerian Hausaland," *Comparative Politics* 21.3 (1989): 323–38.

10. Paul Starobin, "Politics as Theater," *National Journal* 28.40 (5 October 1996), 2102–7, at 2103.

11. Joe Okyere, "President Cuts Sod for C100b Sunyani Regional Hospital," *Daily Graphic*, 7 September 1996, 1.

12. Rawlings's manifesto is available online: National Democratic Congress, "Manifesto: Always for People, Always for Development," 1996, *www.ghanareview.com/NDC_Manifesto.html* (accessed 3 January 2013).

13. J. J. Rawlings, "Let's Go Forward Together," *Daily Graphic*, 12 September 1996, 6.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Torre, 21.

17. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction,* 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22.

18. "President Grateful to Supporters, Well Wishers," *Daily Graphic*, 11 September 1996, 1.

19. Earlier, Rawlings had declared in his acceptance speech that the NDC "belongs to the people and no doors [of the party] must shut to any citizen of goodwill" (Rawlings, "Let's Go Forward Together"). The rally offered him and his party the chance to demonstrate that point because of the size of the crowd and the diversity of the participants. The importance of the rally's spectacle of mass participation to Rawlings and the NDC is evident in the statement by the party's press secretary, who said that the opposition was in a state of shock over the mammoth crowd at the rally and so had begun a "vile propaganda" campaign to "explain away the presence of so many people" by accusing the NDC of "renting" participants ("President Grateful to Supporters," 9).

20. Alhaji B. A. Fuseini and Joe Okyere, "Mother of All Rallies," *Daily Graphic*, 9 September 1996, 1, 12–13.

21. The concert party is a genre of variety popular theatre in Ghana (comprising music, stand-up comedy, and drama) that burgeoned at the turn of the nineteenth century as colonial education

generated new social formations. In the 1930s it moved beyond the colonial school and became itinerant, acquiring a broader audience. Concert party theatre appropriates the characters and style of local folklore, using local vernacular language and dramatizing the frustrations and aspirations of its audiences. Concert party activity declined in Ghana during the politically and economically tumultuous 1980s. However, in 1994, Ghana's National Theatre revived it as a fortnightly show in the capital city, Accra. A year later, the National Theatre teamed up with the multinational company Unilever to sponsor the show under the name Key Soap Concert Party. For details of concert party history, see Cole.

22. National Theater of Ghana, "General Report on the Concert Party Show Sponsored by Key Soap: July–Sept." (1995), obtained from the office of the National Theatre of Ghana.

23. Baba Abdulai, "Bob Okalla [*sic*] in Concert," *Weekly Spectator*, 27 April 1996, 6.

24. Efo Kojo Mawugbe on behalf of the Chairman of the National Commission on Culture to Bob Okala, 8 July 1996 ("Invitation to Perform as a Selected Individual of Excellence at NAFAC '96"), obtained from the office of the National Theatre of Ghana.

25. Baba Abdulai, "Comedy at National Theatre," *Weekly Spectator*, 23 December 1996, 6; and Merari Alomele, "AAA and Okalla [*sic*] Meet," *Weekly Spectator*, 14 September 1996, 6. For similar accolades, see Merari Alomele, "Bob Okalla at Concert Party," *Weekly Spectator*, 3 August 1996, 6; and Michael Crabbe, "Bob Okalla [*sic*] on Stage," *The Mirror*, 20 April 1996, 11.

26. Kwesi Yankah, "Leave Okalla [*sic*] Alone," *The Mirror*, 5 October 1996, 5.

27. "Thugs Threaten O.D. and Okalla [*sic*]," *Daily Graphic*, 23 September 1996, 1. The New Patriotic Party (NPP) was the leading opposition party. Kumasi is Ghana's second-largest city.

28. Ghana News Agency, "Bob Okalla [*sic*]: I'm Not in Politics," *The Mirror*, 26 September 1996, 3.

29. Ibid.

30. Nanabanyin Dadson, "Is Okalla [*sic*] Finished?" *The Mirror*, 28 October 1996, 11.

31. Ibid.

32. In one sense, this proverb describes the immanence of divinity in the ubiquitous wind—that is, in the material world. In another sense, the wind is merely the intermediary between humanity and a transcendent Supreme Being, a conduit for communicating with a distant divinity. But there is a third sense of the proverb that is less metaphysical and more political. It is that third sense I employ in my discussion.

33. Kwesi Yankah, "Nana Kwame Ampadu and the Sung Tale as Metaphor for Protest Discourse," in *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theater and Film*, ed. Kofi Anyidodo and James Gibbs (Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), 135–53, at 137.

34. Kwesi Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief: Ökyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 51.

35. Yankah, "Nana Kwame Ampadu," 141. Subsequent citations are given parenthetically in the text.

36. Bame, 10; E. J. [John] Collins, "Comic Opera in Ghana," *African Arts* 9.2 (1976): 50–7, at 50.

37. Cole, 79.

38. For North Americans, the blackface minstrel practice from which Johnson borrowed "is a highly charged signifier, intimately tied to an unresolved history of racial exploitation, segregation and derisive stereotyping of people of African descent." It was "dramaturgically structured to create a dichotomy between . . . black and white"; Cole, 23–4. The available evidence indicates that neither Johnson nor subsequent "Bob" performers were aware of that particular kind of racial representation. Catherine Cole argues that reading race into contemporary concert party facial makeup would be a case of "wonders taken for signs" (17).

39. Collins, "Comic Opera in Ghana," 50.

40. Cole, 121; Karin Barber, John Collins, and Alain Ricard, "Three West African Popular Theatre Forms: A Social History," in *West African Popular Theatre,* eds. Barber, Collins, and Ricard, 1–55, at 15.

41. Cole, 125.

42. Bame, 32.

43. Crabbe, 11.

44. "Comedians' Gala," Key Soap Concert Party Show, National Theatre of Ghana, Accra, 14 January 2001. This is my translation of the Akan-language live performance.

45. Bame, 32.

46. "Comedians' Gala."

47. Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption & Cleanliness in Zimbabwe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 8. Indeed, the absolute status of a commodity's utility is questionable. As Burke observes (8), "the fundamental utility of the object itself is subject to change, invention or eradication." However, "goods have concrete material qualities which limit and prescribe their uses" and are not "blank slates upon which history and power can write freely." An essential or absolute utility for goods therefore does exist, even if it may be "discerned only in *specific* historical or cultural situations" (italics his).

48. Kwaku Sakyi-Addo, "Soap Wars: Unilever vs. Local Soapmakers," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 11 July 1993, 1.

49. "Comedians' Gala."

50. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 138–9.

51. Yankah, "Leave Okalla [*sic*] Alone," 5 (my italics).

52. Paa Lewis Ankrah, "Politics of Thuggery and Money Arrives in Cape Coast," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 16–19 May 1996, 7; Abdallah Kassim, "NDC Thugs Attack NPP Chairman," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 20–2 May 1996, 6; Osbert Lartey, "Bloody Clash after the NPP Rally," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 18–21 April 1996, 1.

53. Alhaji Fuseini, "NPP Denies Harassing OD and Okala," *Daily Graphic*, 24 September 1996, 1.

54. Joe Lartey, "NPP Exposes Bob Okalla [*sic*]," *The Statesman*, 26 September 1996, 1.

55. Ibid.

56. Zingaro, "Watch These Things," *The Statesman*, 26 September 1996, 1.

57. "Comedians' Gala."

58. Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Drink, Power and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 167.

59. "Comedians' Gala." Okala sang this song in English. Star is the brand name of a lager beer produced by the Kumasi Brewery Ltd. in Ghana. Malt is the syrupy nonalcoholic product of the Guinness and Amstel companies. Guinness is the brand-name lager beer of the Guinness Company. The "Glass and Bottle Church" is a standard part of Okala's routine; it is one of his signature songs and is frequently sung as he exits the stage at the conclusion of his performances.

60. Akyeampong, 19.

61. Ibid.

62. Nana Ewusi, "Stop 'Bishop' Okalla [*sic*] TV Show," *Ghanaian Chronicle*, 25–8 January 1996, 2.

63. "Onyame ahu wo" is also the chorus of a highlife song by musician K. K. Kabobo, who was quite popular at the time.

64. Clarence Coleman, "This Is Not Funny, Okalla [*sic*]," *The Mirror*, 16 March 1996, 2.

65. Crabbe, 11.

66. Ibid.

67. Margaret A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 51.

68. Ghana News Agency, 3.

69. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 57, and see 56n.

70. Joyce Jonas, *Anancy in the Great House: Ways of Reading West Indian Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990), 2.

71. Robert D. Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 40.

72. Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 35. For the specific discussion about multiple selves coexisting in an unresolved dialectical tension, see 6.

73. Ibid. 6

74. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 35.

75. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 46.

76. Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology,* 115.

77. Ibid., 112.



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