What Happens When a Music Video Goes Viral? Gastrocomedy and Prosumer Recreations of Timaya's *I Can't Kill Myself* *

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*Video available at: https://youtu.be/NlyzO7dJ0YY

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the circulation of Timaya's 2019 music video *I Can't Kill Myself* as a means of contemplating contemporary media consumption in Nigeria. Beginning with the premise that media forms are best understood as taking part in a complex web of interactive relationships, the article examines the form, content, and relevance of short videos uploaded on YouTube in response to Timaya's work. The videos provide a means of charting audience engagement with the diverse kinds of audio and visual materials vying for attention in a milieu characterised by sped-up access to means of audio-visual production and dissemination. By tracking such productions, we are able to grasp the socio-political issues that constitute predominant concerns for the prosumers and their target audience, such as the increasing unaffordability of certain food items in the country. Also, the comic representation of food and eating featured in the videos enables us to contemplate the cohesive capacity of humour.

Keywords: Timaya; gastrocomedy;Nigerian music video;YouTube; humour

Introduction

> This life, I can't kill myself
>
> I can't kill myself o
>
> I can't kill myself
>
> Allow me to flex

So begins the hit song of 2019 by Inetimi Timaya Odon, the Nigerian singer and songwriter who goes by the name Timaya. And, no, he is not singing about his inability to commit suicide. He is singing about his unwillingness to; an unwillingness buoyed by a desire to *flex* (enjoy). Despite the rather morbid tenor of the song, this is its message: one must know when to quit striving and unwind or let events take their course. The official music video bears out this interpretation by following the artiste on a journey that ends with him in a fancy hotel, having a solo party, before boarding a private plane to an unknown destination. The hook of the song comes from a popular saying which may be heard in the more convoluted versions of 'I can't come and die', 'I can't come and kill myself' or, in Yorùbá, *'Mi ò lè wá kú!'*. While this genesis in popular philosophy may account for the success of the track, its

proliferation across social media platforms – its viral status – is inextricable from the audience perception and engagement with the music video. The music video presents a ground upon which the audience anchor their own interpretation of such a saying capable of diverse apprehensions. The multiple valences of the video's signifiers are reduced to a specific interpretation which, though evident in the video, is hardly its central motif. Doubling as producers, consumers tether *'I can't kill myself'* to the action of eating, linking Timaya's song and video to the body of cultural productions dependent on images of food and eating for the creation of humour – what I refer to as gastrocomedy or the gastrocomic. My objective in this article is broadly twofold. First, I am interested in how this social media phenomenon illuminates audience engagement with popular forms, particularly, the music video. My questions are: how does the creative response to music videos, in this case, *I Can't Kill Myself,* [1] help us understand the kind of relationship that can hold between different media texts in Nigeria? How does this response shed light on the interpretive modalities that viewers bring to bear on screen media? Second, I am interested to explore the significance of food and eating in the prosumer videos. Rather than take their preponderance as coincidence, I understand them as drawing on the semiotic capacity of the culinary and expressing certain preoccupations of the consumers and the world they live in at this time. The dual concern animating this article results in a somewhat bifurcated structure. I begin with a consideration of the formal properties of the texts and how they circulate, and then proceed to engage a more thematic reading in the second part.

James Yékú's article 'Akpos *Don* Come Again: Nigerian Cyberpop Hero as Trickster' (2016), on the appropriation of oral poetics in new media platforms, is a useful precedent to the issues taken up here. Yékú attempts there to track the journey of the mythical figure of the trickster from oral narratives to contemporary forms of expression enabled by internet and social media applications. Epitomised in the character of Akpos, 'the *aggregate hero* of popular jokes in Nigeria' (253), the trickster manifests as a humorous conduit for political commentary and resistance by previously passive consumers now empowered by the 'unmediated representational space' of digital culture (247). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work, Yékú's investigation is subtended by an understanding crucial to the purpose of this article: that cultural forms are best understood in terms of their relations with one another in a complex field of media interaction. Like him, I had begun to iterate this notion in relation to Nollywood's prominence in the scholarship on Nigerian media. I have been keen to situate Nigeria's film industry as a participant in an ecology of screen media, rather than the default point of access to screen culture (see Eromosele forthcoming). I pursue that argument even further here via the conception of audience as prosumers. While this is a point of resonance with Yékú, it is also one of departure. As opposed to his focus on a specific character figuration across media platforms, I am concerned with the migrations and mutations of a certain philosophy across media. I am concerned with how this notion becomes an organising principle in how audio-visual productions are consumed and disseminated.

The figure of the prosumer that features here emerges from recent attempts to disrupt the hegemonic binaries of production and consumption. In the last two decades, the preponderance of participatory online platforms such as websites that run on user generated content (UGC), has engendered this revaluation of the ontological status of consumers of digital media. For George Ritzer, a major proponent of the concept of 'prosumer', it is not just the most appropriate way to understand producer/consumer relations in these times; it is primordial, human nature (Ritzer 2014), and 'the existence of largely separable producers and consumers is, at best, a historical anomaly' (Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson 2012). Ritzer proposes that both production and consumption be considered subsets of prosumption; there

is no pure form of either, he argues; to a varying extent there is always some element of the one in the other. I, however, follow Van Dijck (2009, 42) in thinking that such blanket generalisation proceeds from an initial problematic simplification of user agency as split between those who produce and those who consume. Basing her arguments on an American survey, van Dijck proffers that user participation and agency on UGC sites may be categorised according to six levels: active creators, critics, collectors, joiners, passive spectators and inactives. Admittedly, whichever level one falls into, there is always some form of contribution made through the workings of data mining algorithms that monitor and record user behaviour online. I align the prosumer here with the 'active creators' on YouTube who, as opposed to music video consumers on television, take advantage of 'better access to networked media, enabling them to "talk back" in the same multimodal language that frames cultural products formerly made exclusively in studios' (2009, 43).

I Can't Kill Myself and Its Many Lives

The music video is a typically dense form, laying claim to several axes of signification simultaneously. This is inextricable from the way it relays its message. At different points, its visuals could be elaborating the song lyrics, mirroring the music or in counterpoint to it, or telling a narrative observably distinguishable from either the lyrics or music. [2] With the advent of even more sophisticated technology, properties such as colour and hue can become modified such that they exist as narrative elements within a frame (Vernallis 2013). Simply put, with fewer shots than one finds in more lengthy cinematic products, the music video must tell its stories and be convincing about these. Timaya's video tells several stories from which prosumers may draw, some in consonance with the lyrics, others, generated by visual interpretation of the popular philosophy its title takes on.

I Can't Kill Myself is structured around a fairly common music video motif: the journey. The first scene shows Timaya intermittently standing, sitting and reclining. The setting is a luxurious shed on the beach at night. There is a bonfire burning and a table set with assorted delicacies. The camera captures bowls of fruits, barbecued meat, chicken salad, and dessert. As Timaya gets into the verse, beginning with 'many many years me I don dey go [for many years I have been forging ahead]', the viewer is transported to another time and setting. He is driving a Porsche convertible, the 'go' in the lyrics obviously played upon. The camera stays on him as he sings about his hard work in the music industry and his frustration with critics. Images of other people and places intersperse this rendition. There is a neighbourhood outdoor market, cows grazing in front of a solitary house, a trader's table with potatoes and luscious-looking tomatoes, a palm tree behind a shack, two boys staring from behind a wall, and the feet of a child climbing on top of the wall. Timaya's car breaks down, and as he tries to find a solution to his predicament, we see shots of padlocks being sold in a shop, and the National Arts Theatre in Iganmu, Lagos. Locking up his Porsche, Timaya flags down a white mini-bus, suitcase in hand. The bus presumably takes him to his destination. When the final chorus comes on, he is in a bathroom, singing and dancing. A chauffeur takes him to board a private plane where he is treated with much deference by the pilot and hostess. He sits down to enjoy a bowl of fruits, drinking straight from a bottle of champagne as its content foams and spills. The video ends with him asleep as the plane flies through the sky (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Timaya sipping wine in the official video of *I Can't Kill Myself*, directed by DK for Priorgold Pictures.

While the overarching journey motif in *I Can't Kill Myself* is clearly identifiable, the disparate nature of the interspersed images renders their connection to the overall narrative quite opaque. One could read them in terms of the variety of sights encountered on a journey. At first glance, this is indeed all they appear to be. However, contrasting the speed of Timaya's Porsche, the camera seems to linger on these shots, moving just slowly enough for the viewer to take in details of the scene. What connects the images is their distinction from Timaya and the markers of speed and opulence around him. There is also a distinction between the images themselves. Only the National Arts Theatre, a national monument in Lagos, is identifiable. All others are generic images one may associate with rurality or outskirts of the city. My understanding is that the two are juxtaposed. Timaya's destination is really the city (perhaps, as the mecca of artistic expression) and his journey is one from the margins to the centre. But the locations are not impermeably distinguished; movement goes both ways and embraces diverse modes of commuting. This renders a metaphorical edge to the lyrics–visuals alignment of the video, especially at the point where Timaya's car breaks down. Fancy as the Porsche is, it is unable to get the artiste to his destination. He only achieves this by ditching the car and hopping on to public transport, a move often considered incompatible with the projected image of wealth. Read in tandem with the lyrics, 'I can't kill myself' suggests the necessity of improvisation, the readiness to discard initial plans, should they fail to yield envisaged results or get one to the desired destination.

Prosumer response to Timaya's video has taken three main formal variants. First, their original content, often amateur production, overlaid with the song, makes them look like Do-It-Yourself music videos. These have neither prolonged narrative, dialogue, nor character development; just a scene with a single action, from which the viewer must deduce its resonance with Timaya's song and video. For lack of a better term, we can call it a DIY Parody. The second, similar to the first, features original content in the form of narrative skit with dialogue and variation in setting. Timaya's music works as soundtrack, sometimes in conjunction with other songs. We can call this Narrative (DIY) Parody. Third is the Mashup Parody, with content culled from social media or some other source, usually movies, and then

set to Timaya's song. It may or may not include dialogue. Together, the variants constitute what Vernallis (2013) simply refers to as YouTube clips, and exemplify some of the features she outlines as characteristic of such media. I have distinguished between specific forms here for ease of reference and, despite having drawn my examples from YouTube, to intimate that they do not all circulate solely on that platform as Vernallis's term implies. I encountered some of them on Facebook and Twitter.

The different prosumer engagements with Timaya's song emphasise specific interpretations of the saying 'I can't kill myself', most of which are either intimated at the parametric level of the lyrics or the images of the music video. Some videos dramatise a show of physical strength or other capabilities, homing in on 'I can't kill myself' as the importance of knowing the limits of one's ability and learning when to quit. [3] Timaya's admonishment in the lyrics that 'the world can do without the best' endorses the call to refrain from unnecessary and potentially harmful competition. Others focus on the need to make do, referencing the musician's resort to public transport when his expensive ride fails him. [4] By far the most predominant interpretations have centred around images of food and eating, recalling the scenes of enjoyment which bookend the music video. [5] In this, the prosumer videos attempt to stabilise, by virtue of sheer volume, the meaning of Timaya's video and song and the saying upon which it is based, while simultaneously ushering the conversation into a different but equally contested terrain of the gastronomic. The basic structure of these videos involves someone eating excessively with seeming disregard for notions of etiquette or social expectations.

With some variation, most 'I Can't Kill Myself' videos are patterned like the above. The humour is tied to not just the quantity and type of food being consumed, but also the place and manner in which it is consumed and the character of the person eating. In the video attributed to Officer Woos and uploaded to YouTube on December 7, 2019 by Precious Bello, [6] all these elements are combined. [7] The main character [8] is a passenger on *okada*, [9] stuck in traffic, a regular feature in a city like Lagos. He is eating from a tray on his lap containing assorted pastry and food. There is a policeman waiting on him, putting a bottle of Pepsi to his mouth when he needs a sip. His attire – *agbada* and cap with gold chain on his neck and bracelet on his left wrist – appears to corroborate the mien of importance signalled by his possession of a policeman as personal aide. As the *okada* drives forward, it is evident that he is wearing nothing but his underpants beneath the agbada. Several elements combine in this video to produce its effect. Chief among them is the clash of signs projected by the character. A person important enough to be attended to by a policeman will usually not be on an *okada*, a mode of transportation most favoured by the working class; or having a full meal on it, as if he were at a restaurant. And why would such a person be out with only an *agbada* covering his underpants or so sloppily have food all over his mouth? (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Officer Woos as big man on Okada in his 'I Can't Kill Myself' parody.

In an example that fits in the category of Narrative (DIY) Parody, the image of importance vs subservience is extended much further in a full-blown narrative of 03:40 minutes. Attributed to Amani White, the video shows a man (played by Amani) eating directly from a pot of rice and chicken. [10] He is captured in two public settings: the beach and by the roadside. In both locations, there is another man holding up a fan to cool him while he eats. Amani takes off his wristwatch, his shirt, and loosens his shorts to allow him to eat more comfortably. Soon enough, he collapses on his back, apparently exhausted from all the eating. Timaya's song stops, and a dialogue ensues. Speaking Pidgin, Amani begs the other man – now seated and eating the rice and chicken – to please call him an ambulance. The man mocks him to get up and eat, citing Amani's greed and refusal to share the food. Tope Alabi's song comes on: '*Ayé le ò, ìbosí òó! Ayé d'orí kodò, kò yé mi mó. Nìbo làn lo, ènìyàn, ó sú mi yé!* … [This world is a difficult place, hypocrisy abounds! This world has turned upside down, I no longer understand. Where are we headed, humans? I am tired! …]'. The video ends with Amani being carried on the man's back, presumably to get him help. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3. Amani eating himself to exhaustion in a video uploaded to his YouTube channel on August 3, 2019.

The Mashup Parody collects visual materials from various sources, mostly from similar clips on YouTube or other social media. I am interested in those taken from Nigerian movies, as these illustrate cogently consumer relationship with such a major industry as Nollywood. One such, uploaded by asedeyhot and credited to 9jacinema, [11] shows the duo Osita Iheme and Chinedu Ikedize, two diminutive actors known for playing the role of children, eating and drinking. Osita plays a prank on Chinedu by taking his meat when he is not looking. The video ends with John Okafor (popularly known as Mr Ibu), eating what appears to be eba or fufu. Much of the humour in this instance derives from a foreknowledge of the Nollywood star system. Mr Ibu is known for his comic acting, and Osita Iheme and Chinedu Ikedize, especially early on in their careers, were often cast together as mischievous brothers. The first scene in the mashup is taken specifically from *Tom and Jerry*, a movie about troublesome twins (Thomas and Jeremiah) who terrorise their blind grandfather and the neighbourhood with their pranks. [12] The viewer is primed for the plot and expected to engage with it against the backdrop of the American animated series of the same name (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4. Osita Iheme and Chinedu Ikedieze, adult diminutive actors playing the roles of the mischievous Thomas and Jeremiah in *Tom and Jerry* (Dir. Kenneth Egbuna).

It would be erroneous to consider the above forms simply combinations of Timaya's song and amateur visual productions or scenes from Nollywood. Rather, one should see them in the light of Bolter and Grusin's (2000) much appropriated concept of remediation. While referring to different kinds of relationship that may hold between media in contemporary times, the authors narrow the term down to the appearance or mediation of one medium in another. The sense in which the concept appears here is in the notions of repurposing, 'pouring a familiar content in another media form' (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 68), and refashioning, the borrowing of content from preceding works of the same medium (49). Specifically, the idea that 'I can't kill myself' ought to be associated with gustatory pleasure is drawn from Timaya's video, repurposed in the prosumer videos and refashioned in the reiterated images of excessive culinary consumption.

Despite the observable absence of images from the official music video in the several prosumer productions, each iteration understands itself as partaking in – and in fact may only be read as a response to, an interlocutor of, an interpretation of – the world of the music video. The music video is the ur-text giving meaning to their existence. This understanding

guides their circulation on streaming platforms. A potential viewer searching YouTube for Timaya's video is presented with a list of options, all related to 'I can't kill myself'. Hardly of identical content or production value, most, if not all, the presented options are understood as part of a genus of works around Timaya's official music video. Hence, the viral nature of the latter means that it does not simply gain admittance into a realm where it interacts 'virally' with existing media, but also that it becomes the centripetal force directing how media products congregate.

Apart from catalysing new productions, older ones, ranging from random videos on the internet to more established forms like Nollywood movies, are reorganised and conscripted into an ecology of 'I Can't Kill Myself'. Buoyed by an interpretation localised in Timaya's official video, a scene from *Tom and Jerry*, for example, is detached from its original context, 'repurposed', given new lease which, while retaining residues of previous meanings, enables new ones to emerge, and thus enables the characters to engage in new conversations that are not necessarily tied to Nollywood. Iheme's and Ikedieze's characters are consumed, not as the pranksters of their original iteration, but as exemplary members of a community of 'foodies', a people bound by their love for food and eating. I will elaborate on this below. My point is even more explicitly demonstrated in the upload by Adeyemi Adeolu on August 19, 2019, featuring Nkem Owoh as policeman. [13] The title reads 'Mr Osuofia in "I can't kill myself"', clearly indicating that what matters to this prosumer is not the movie, the original context of the action, but how Nkem Owoh's character fits into the constellation of 'I Can't Kill Myself'. With the 'in' of the title, this character is served up as appearing in an entirely new production, its previous history simultaneously erased and grounded in the understanding that he is Osuofia, [14] a comic protagonist.

Creative responses to *I Can't Kill Myself* mostly zone in on the activity of eating, the repetitive back-and-forth movement of the hand between the mouth and a plate or several plates of food. In Vernallis's (2013, 132) opinion, the preponderance of repetition or reiteration may be attributed to several factors including aesthetics, production practices, prosumers' level of training, contemporary technology, and sociocultural contexts. Insightful as her explanation is, it does not adequately distinguish between internal repetition (within clips) and external ones (across clips). This is perhaps appropriate to the level of analysis she undertakes in the work, in that it dwells chiefly on the formal features of YouTube clips. Attention to thematic iteration leads us to wonder why the action of eating in particular recurs. What is the significance of this activity in the public imaginary at this time? Considering that not all the videos emanate from Nigeria, what connection binds them? In the next section, I explore the recurrence of eating, anchoring my reading around Ebenezer Obadare's comment about jokes – and one I think I applies to comic forms in general: they 'take on an aspect of "current history", ephemeral "transcripts" through which an observer can trace the patterns and obsessions of everyday life in the country' (2010, 105).

Food, Gastrocomedy, and the Everyday: Against the 'Againstness' of Comic Forms

Food and eating are essential to human existence. They index interaction with self and others, with the environment, and with divinity (Appadurai 1988, 1981; Fischler 1988). Food is bound up with issues of subjectivity and community in the way lives are structured around what may be consumed, under what circumstances, and with whom one may do so. A person's body size, and hence what they perceive and are perceived to be physically capable of, is bound up with ideas about the kinds of food and how much they eat. Relations of power, whether secular or religious, are contracted and reified within the ambits of food

production, distribution and consumption (Goody 1982; Counihan 1999). In short, because of its necessity for human existence vis-à-vis the unpredictability of its scarcity and abundance in most parts of the world, food is locus for understanding several domains of human interaction. It can be used to define communities and national identities, as well as exclude others.

The importance and ubiquity of food in most domains of living also make it a 'peculiarly powerful semiotic device' (Appadurai 1981, 494). In other words, its usefulness transcends the sustenance of the biological human form, and enters the realm of culture, of meaning-making and representational practices. As the French theorist Roland Barthes puts it, far from being a mere 'collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies', food is also simultaneously, 'a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour' (1975, 49–50). This is why it has proven a productive arena for much social science research, which has tended to focus on specific – and sometimes overlapping – areas such as '*cuisine,* the food elements used and rules for their combination and preparation; *etiquette and food rules*, the customs governing what, with whom, when, and where one eats; *taboo*, the prohibitions and restrictions on the consumption of certain foods by certain people under certain conditions; and *symbolism,* the specific meanings attributed to foods in specific contexts' (Counihan 1999, 19–20).

In African representational – especially literary – practice, food and eating have rarely been understood solely in light of their mundane and banal repetitiveness. Rather, they are conscripted in service of privileged themes of national leadership, as 'metaphors for political corruption, the greedy acquisition of material goods, and the social inequality engendered by the latter in both the colonial and post-independence eras' (Ojwang 2011, 69). The corpulent or flatulent frame of the politician or national leader is a common image in many African fictional works, regardless of their region. It appears in Ngũgĩ wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross* (1982), *The Shameful State* ([1981] 2016) by Sony Labou Tansi, and in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1988). An obverse of this is the rejection of food, as depicted in Nyasha's anorexia in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* ([1988] 2004). There, food and the refusal to consume becomes a means of speaking rebellion. The preponderance of the association of eating with leadership occasions their literal equation, as in Jean-François Bayart's (1993) description of the state in Africa as encapsulated by 'the politics of the belly' or James Ogude's (2009) reading of the state in African literature as a site of eating.

Food and eating, because of their capacity to evince strong affective states, are also a means of generating humour. The overfed and grotesque body of the political leader cuts a highly comical image (Veit-Wild 2006; Mbembe 2015). And it is in this satirical capacity as a means of poking fun at power that the association of food and humour, the gastrocomical, has tended to be analysed in much critical literature. [15] In African screen media, particularly in the Nigerian context which is my concern here, food has been deployed in ways that, in addition to its overt political valence, emphasise its capacity for generating hilarity, for use as narrative device in service of other ends. One thinks here of films featuring actors like Nkem Owoh (Osuofia), Mr Ibu, and the Osita Iheme/Chinedu Ikedieze duo mentioned above. The creation of the comical is focused not only on the kind of food consumed, but on the manner in which it is. Hilarity ensues from the response of the actors to what is considered delicious, unpleasant, or foreign, and the melodramatic gestures used in articulating this. In *Osuofia in London (Part 1)*, [16] for example, a movie about Osuofia's sojourn to an unfamiliar clime (the UK) to claim his dead brother's wealth, the most significant device for foregrounding his

difference is food. Most of his actions in the movie centre on the hunt for food, his understanding of what may or may not be hunted, his discrimination of what can pass for a meal, his knowledge of where and how to purchase food, and, after consumption, the appropriate conditions to dispose of its waste from the body.

A close reading of the prosumer videos to Timaya's song shows how they draw on and respond to these various meanings and traditions of representing food and eating. While they can all be understood as continuous with the Nollywood tradition of the gastrocomic as narrative device, they also gesture towards a political and social consciousness. This is evident particularly in the videos by Amani White and Officer Woos. In the former, the hilarity is a product of Amani's eating directly from a big pot of rice at public places, and biting into an entire chicken – actions most eaters would consider too ludicrous to engage in. The flouting of eating etiquette is compounded by the excess of his consumption. The thrust of the video, however, lies in the intertextual correlations it performs. By stringing Timaya's song to Tope Alabi's lamentation about a world going to hell in a handbasket, 'I Can't Kill Myself' is embedded in a moral discourse of generosity and concern for other humans. The video presents a counterpoint to the image of individualised enjoyment in Timaya's music video. Its extended title, 'I Can't Kill Myself for Them', signals enjoyment as a social relationship, a state inextricable from a universe that includes others. A world structured by exploitation, by dominance, where one person eats alone and others serve him, is a world that has 'turned upside down'. The image of the man holding the fan so Amani can eat comfortably is juxtaposed with the several people working to get Timaya to his destination in the official music video: the invisible chauffeur, the hostess, the pilot. Amani's collapse at the end of the video and his friend/servant's mocking remarks resonate with another popular saying: 'chop alone, die alone'. [17] It bears the critical message that those who consume in absolute disregard of others will end up glutting themselves to illness or death, ending up at the mercy of those they had scorned. The friend/servant's eventual decision to carry Amani on his back to go seek help is a disavowal of that principle.

In the video by Officer Woos, the reference is more clearly political through the presence of the policeman attending to the rich man on *okada*. Like the above, its humour comes from the incongruity of the eating situation as well as the overall buffoonery of the supposedly rich man. However, it also resonates with the political climate in Nigeria, where any individual, if they are rich enough, can commandeer state resources and personnel for private use. It is common in the country to see important – and oftentimes, not so important – political or business figures being attended by umbrella-carrying police aides. [18] The person need not even be rich enough to afford a car, the video seems to say; provided he can pay specifically for the service, he can have a police officer holding his drink for him. In the pursuit of self-aggrandisement, state personnel and resources are just as available for hire as make-up artist and personal assistants.

It should be unsurprising that food and eating serve as ready instruments for mocking power. Copulating, drinking and feasting constitute the economy of pleasure with which postcolonial leadership tends to be preoccupied (Mbembe 2015, 126–127). The predilection of postcolonial *Commandement* – Achille Mbembe's term for state power – for lechery, on the one hand, necessitates emphasis on genitals and orifices for the intake and expulsion of food, and on the other, makes visible the logic of its rule – the arrogation of the rights to consume, disseminate and gift the nation's resources at will. These images also become residues in the wake of power, materials with which the subaltern engage the cosmology of *Commandement* in a way that alternatively domesticates, distances, colludes with and de-mythologises its

majesty. Not only this. The obscenity of excess by the elite and political class is often juxtaposed to the lack and deprivation of the majority population. Hence, food scarcity and not just its abundance is weaponised as indictment against any regime considered to be underperforming. In the immediate historical and political context of 'I Can't Kill Myself' videos, the government led by Muhammadu Buhari has been subject to public and popular appraisal through the regular tracking of the cost of rice. This is against an economic milieu of hovering recession and border closure to boost production of Nigerian-made goods (see Unah 2019). All over social and news media, people post and debate the cost of rice and other basic food items as a measure for how well or poorly the government has performed since its accession in 2015. [19] The difficulty in obtaining such necessities for the sustenance of life, in addition to the images of pomp projected by the elite class, means that notions of 'the good life' come to be constructed around the ability to eat and the unlimited availability of what can be consumed. 'I Can't Kill Myself' prosumers appear less seduced by Timaya's Porsche, his chauffeur driven car, or private jet, than by the scene of luxurious feasting. This is what captures the imagination. Interestingly, however, Timaya rarely eats in the entire video. He merely motions to bite an apple (00:11) and takes a grape in the last scene (02:54) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Comedian Mc Da Saint and associate playing the role of Boko Haram soldiers complaining about having to survive on instant noodles since Buhari made it impossible for them to have rice.

As already intimated, gastrocomedy need not be inserted into the ready paradigm of humour as resistance or participation in the public sphere, outside the purview of the state. Much critical attention on comic forms in Africa has tended to emphasise their quality of 'againstness'. By this I mean the propensity of humour to be appropriated as a tool in opposition to, as alternative to, or generally in response to conditions of subjection or the stifling formality of official spaces. Humour in most of these accounts, to use the words of the novelist Chinua Achebe (2009, 6), is always standing beside something. In Yékú's argument (2016), humour, enabled by the democratised platforms of internet sites and mobile phone apps, is an individuated mode of resistance, a weapon for 'especially dispossessed subjects in postcolonial states, to affirm their capacity for political agency, determine their own narratives, and to confront, the exclusionary regulations of corruptive social structure'

(260). Afolayan (2013) makes a similar claim. He understands hilarity as 'a critical means of deconstructing the mystique of domination' which simultaneously – and sometimes unwittingly – exposes the complicity of the oppressed. His position proceeds from Achille Mbembe's, noting the capacity for reflexivity in postcolonial humour which the latter overlooks. Obadare's (2009, 2010, 2016) series of interventions on the subject sutures humour into the discourse of civil society. While admitting several times that 'subaltern humour is sometimes its own end … [t]he very process of letting off steam', he is particularly interested in the fact that it is 'deeply symbolic and counter discursive', a means of 'identifying and causing power to face up to its own grossness' (2009, 248–9). The 'againstness' of humour is emphasised through the recurrent oppositions of elite and subaltern humour, formal and informal spaces, state and civil society. An attempt, like Mbembe's (2015), that seeks to disrupt the binary categories of resistance vs passivity, autonomy vs subjection etc. still ultimately conceives of humour in its oppositional form, albeit one that drags what it opposes into a relationship of conviviality. This is my point: in all these instances, what is underscored is humour more as a relationship of *laughing at* than of *laughing with*. [20] (See Figure 6.)

Figure 6. caption: Ajebo Toons presents an apocalyptic Nigeria where jollof rice has become extinct after the people voted 'Change'.

Prosumer recreations of *I Can't Kill Myself* offer an opportunity to innervate that often assumed, and hence disregarded, aspect of humour in the postcolony: its constitution of a relationship of *laughing with*. Humour, first and foremost, creates communities; most forms of *laughing at* are made possible, only by the prior existence of a capacity to *laugh with*. Without cognisance of this very basic understanding of humour, analysis of certain comic forms in the postcolony will be incomplete. Thomas Conley has rightly observed that jokes proceed from 'what the audience already knows and thinks and values' (2004, 267), what Afolayan terms 'epistemic intimacy' (168). Every comic form possesses both a syntax and semantic element that must be decoded for it to be successful. Such decoding may only be done by a community that (a) can decipher the codes of the comic form, and (b) understands its message as constituting a category of the humorous or laughable. This deeply social characteristic makes it difficult to conceive of humour as being an end in itself, for even when it appears so, its vehicle of dissemination performs the function of connecting persons capable of laughing *with* others *about* a particular situation or person. Many a person must have, at one time or the other, felt the exclusionary edge in the statement 'No, you just don't get it', as a result of their inability to apprehend something considered particularly humorous by others. But because humour is context dependent, it also means that the constituted community is neither definite nor concrete: those who find a situation funny today might not do so tomorrow; those who initially do not 'get it' might come to do so at a later time; and the same situation, with the passage of time, might become funny in a different way. The

understanding that humour in the postcolony proceeds chiefly from situations of privation, coupled with the predominance of the discourse of resistance, has meant that the bonding capacity of comic forms is always glossed over in favour of a more 'important' function humour is supposed to perform.

'I Can't Kill Myself' parodies speak to viewers who identify with the characters on screen. In particular, to those who possess similar relationships with food. In this light, the videos project a celebratory rhetoric rather than a laughter of mockery or derision. It is a gathering summon to those who defy society's prescriptive notions about food, eating, and what constitutes a healthy or appropriate relationship with both. The best illustration of my point here is the video by 9jacinema. In addition to the proprietary and promotional information presented on screen, it comes with instruction on what to do with the video ('Tag a foodie'), complete with an emoji for gustatory pleasure. In other words, the prosumer already delineates the target audience as people who are or who know foodies, with the assumption that only such an interpretive community will 'get' the humour in the video. Though it can be argued that there is a *laughing at* in this video and others already mentioned here (at oneself instead of an 'other'), the significance of *laughing with* is emphasised.

An important point to note, of course, is how the community connected by food – the foodies that 9jacinema gestures – is not bound by geography. The internet and the various video streaming services are a town hall where people of similar mindsets engage in defiance of national borders. Many of the 'I Can't Kill Myself' videos uploaded on YouTube do not originate from Nigeria. Their producers are from places in Europe, Asia, and North America. And they are not bound by national ties either. Some prosumers are neither Nigerian nor primarily resident in the country. The American pop star, Cardi B, after her visit to Nigeria in 2019, performed her own version of 'I Can't Kill Myself' live on Instagram on December 11. Admittedly, her effort and the way it has circulated online extends the meaning of the saying to overtly embrace defiance and indifference to malicious criticism. It would be naïve to not take into consideration that this also serves in the overall star iconography of the musician – along with momentarily taking on the name Chioma B – a way to 'connect' with her teeming Nigerian fans. 'I Can't Kill Myself' in Cardi B's hands – or mouth – becomes not just a way of embracing one's identity as a foodie and dismissing 'haters', but of doing so the 'Nigerian' way.

Conclusion

So, what happens when a music video goes viral? My answer in this article has been to demonstrate how such an event provides a means of tracking what political or socio-cultural issues constitute predominant concerns with the community of consumers, and, in the current milieu of varied media products accessible on diverse platforms, how prosumer responses provide a window to engage the promiscuous and intractable patterns of consumer relationships between, across, and amongst the different media vying for attention. The increasing significance of internet-based streaming and social platforms commends us to consider the existence of audio-visual productions, whether movies or music videos, in the light of a web of relationships appropriated or generated by the audience. Spectator enjoyment and interpretation of media lie, not just in the products themselves but in their relationship with others, in how viewers can bring previous audio-visual encounters to bear on a new one. Internet-enabled sites of dissemination coupled with the availability of inexpensive production equipment has meant that viewers have become capable of materialising their interpretation, and consequently, providing the popular culture scholar

with a map of where they go in search of visual pleasure. With the illustration of Timaya's *I Can't Kill Myself*, we see how the music video is engaged with as more than simply a promotional tool, but as an instigator of conversations not evident in the song itself.

My reading of Timaya's video suggests that in addition to the common-sense logic that media productions go viral because they resonate with most people, they become so by their capacity to usher viewers into a zone of deliberation, a space of contested meanings. The attempt to stabilise such meanings results in the proliferation of productions animated by the 'ambiguous motive of homage and rivalry' (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 49). The productions do not only tacitly reference the inspiration for their understanding but aim to assert the primacy of their own interpretation, aim to become 'viral' as well. Prosumer creations of 'I Can't Kill Myself' hark back to the official music video through the emphasis on a solitary eater; however, they also exist alongside similar productions offering their own versions of the semiotic capacity of culinary enjoyment. Chiefly dominated by a discourse of hilarity, every version reveals key aspects of everyday life in the postcolony. Gastrocomedy, the humorous mobilisation of images of food and eating, organises the circulation of both Timaya's video and the popular saying 'I can't kill myself'.

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Notes

[1] Considering the multiple referents of 'I can't kill myself' that I speak to, I italicise (*I Can't Kill Myself*) to indicate Timaya's music video and adopt sentence case ('I can't kill myself') to designate its understanding as a popular philosophy. Where my concern is the body of videos generated on the subject, I use initial capital letters ('I Can't Kill Myself').

[2] In the literature, analysis of music video tends to focus on its visual properties. However, the works of Nicholas Cook, Michel Chion, and Carol Vernallis have been significant in steering the scholarship towards a consideration of other parameters such as lyrics and music. For more on the kinds of connection that can exist between these features and the moving image, see Chion 1990; Cook 1998; and Vernallis 2004.

[3] See the following videos: a) https://youtu.be/UgZz8Cp4Zw8; b) https://youtu.be/qS1kG44LOBM; c) https://youtu.be/HIFjciEc1m4; d) https://youtu.be/p_H5mmRHecc; e) https://youtu.be/8SiCnQ3YR8M; f) https://youtu.be/5IzIzrYB_QA; g) https://youtu.be/6enNij0casw.

[4] These tend to feature the ways people improvise to cope with the typically hot weather in the absence of constant electricity or such luxuries as air conditioning. See e.g. https://youtu.be/PrQHuleIRrc; and https://youtu.be/4nUruD8__8Q.

[5] Apart from the videos cited directly in this article, also see a) https://youtu.be/_OOGKXymSpQ; b) https://youtu.be/QdZCGWTOUl0; c) https://youtu.be/WtMpdhRlBnE; d) https://youtu.be/Iqx2iQohRoo; e) https://youtu.be/svuFHjByX4I; f) https://youtu.be/ITuKH_2sjr4.

[6] Since it is easier to identify uploaders of the prosumer videos than their creators, my reference will be focused on them.

[7] See video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnrWBw4R-3M.

[8] Officer Woos, who plays the main character, is popularly known for his series of comic skits on current issues in Nigeria. He hosts a YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCw1CI9X0fOsQxf984GH2HYA.

[9] Commercial motorcycle.

[10] See video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAvznOV6YiE.

[11] See video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lq4kI4Kodk.

[12] *Tom and Jerry* is available on YouTube at https://youtu.be/xm8dJJtD9zo.

[13] See video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYEqGYYlJvg.

[14] Osuofia is the character Nkem Owoh plays in the two-part film, *Osuofia in London* (Dir. Kingsley Ogoro). See video at https://youtu.be/hvlsLCb-7lY. The actor is now often identified by this name, even when he plays other characters.

[15] See e.g. already mentioned above, Ogude's (2009) reading of Ngũgĩ; Veit-Wild's (2006, 97) reading of Labou Tansi, and Mbembe (2015) on the same author through the coding of 'mouth', 'belly' and 'phallus'. See also Delores B. Philips (2019) on the predominance of the 'gastropolitical' in African literature.

[16] Video available on Youtube at https://youtu.be/hvlsLCb-7lY.

[17] Several other videos emphasise this moral discourse, e.g. Sofaz's, where the character ends up with gastrointestinal complications from eating too much of the wrong combination of food. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqM_Q9FAKfs.

[18] See https://punchng.com/our-police-their-servants-how-nigerias-vips-use-police-officers-others-as-domestic-servants/.

[19] These circulate as tweets and retweets which sometimes also get shared on Facebook. See, for example, https://twitter.com/Demoore90210/status/950450011753668608?s=19; https://twitter.com/rilw_n/status/1119856922843385856?s=19; and https://twitter.com/xexiboy2/status/1181175686486204416?s=20. There were gastrocomic responses even before the advent of Timaya's video. See, for example, Mc Da Saint's clip where the Boko Haram soldiers complain about starving in the forest due to the price of rice during Buhari's government (https://youtu.be/co3HqKi_-ac) and Ajebo Toon's animation clip about the extinction of Jollof rice right after the country voted Buhari (https://youtu.be/YuL1Mp_TOSo). In the video by Mega Jocular Comedy, a pastor scorns the gift of a car for a bag of rice (https://youtu.be/BidSXY7nOU0).

[20] Afolayan does make this distinction between laughing *at* and laughing *with*. However, he, like most scholars, devalues laughing *with,* considering it '*merely* a mode of escape that gives vent to the impotent and dark thoughts within' (2013, 159; my emphasis).

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