

The Family in Television Comedy:
Mediated Experiences of Family Life

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Constructing the Family

Rhetoric about family life has been constructed and circulated in different media forms for a long time. Families are featured in the news, in films, on radio and television. Soap operas and comedies are well known sources for encountering family drama, yet the situation comedy is unique in its focus on the domestic context and concern for narratives of everyday life. These are programmes that inform the way identities of individuals and groups are constructed. In this regard comedy offers a literal context of that general texture of experience which Silverstone (1999) and Martin (2003) recommend for the study of the media. This is understandable as the family is the institution that has been at the centre of social organisation. It is regarded as the place of primary instruction, where individuals are nurtured and learn to recognise the agreed social norms and values (Isuigo-Abanihe & Obono 1999). Often it is the place where conflict with these is avoided, and the pressure to conform is exerted. So important are these media representations of family life, that they have been appropriated by public figures and politicians around the world to “account for their own practices and mobilise support for their actions.” (Morgan quoted in Chambers 2001). In the crucial national ideological struggle between the USA and then Soviet Union, the image of the family carried the added burden of bearing the national pride as well. In Britain the New Labour party has identified families as the source and saviour of the society’s ills; consequently *good* families are constantly pitched against *dysfunctional* ones. The cultural studies approach show that these images are not natural or fixed, rather they are constructed. The images and narratives that are circulated are products of cultural processes and indicative of much more than is apparent. They may inform the direction and acceleration of the social programmes for change and should therefore be brought under scrutiny. It is for this reason that the paper will examine a sample of situation comedies to see how consistent they are with the declared population and development goals. The paper shall examine the place and space allocated to the family. It shall examine the structure within the family and the challenges and aspirations confronting the family.

Population and Development Goals

Development is a concept which has gone through various thought processes hence the different paradigms that are apparent in literature. Irrespective of the perspective employed, development to communication scholars is about effecting changes that enhance improvement in human, cultural socioeconomic and political conditions of the individual and the society at large. (Moemeka 1994 pg 11) Development has also been defined as “a widely participatory process of directed social change that is intended to bring about both social and material advancement”. (Rogers in Nariman 1993)

It was once conceived simply as an improvement in the conditions of the individual and the prevalent quality of life, thus stressing the economic dimensions of living, to the detriment of other social and political strands that are necessary for the desired changes to occur.

The ultimate aim of development is to have majority of the people in society gaining greater control of their environment, and having a say in their own affairs, so that there is equity, social justice, access and participation. Though having appropriate economic structures is a critical prerequisite for this to occur, there are other areas of life that must be addressed. When there is a large population and diverse interest groups, the challenge of fostering understanding amongst the different groups in order

to ensure that there is unity of purpose becomes evident. It is important to avoid chaos or anarchy which may arise due to the confusion or dissonance that may accompany social change. This justifies the need to harness media support for the purpose of development or social change. The media require a mode of operation that enables a fair consideration of the needs and aspirations of various individuals and groups so that there is a fair representation of these in the collective aspiration that is reflected. Sensitivity to the prospects of marginalisation is important in the mass media which cannot but operate in the interest of the majority.

The media intervention programmes adopted within earlier paradigms of development, were built on transportation models of media influence. These were based on the views that the media, being all powerful will stimulate direct responses from audiences. Informed by this orientation such programmes would typically emphasise the dissemination of what was deemed to be appropriate instruction or information which audiences were expected to comply or heed. There were limited successes experienced with the use of such models; whilst immunisation campaigns and census drives in Nigeria were largely successful, the campaigns for more sustained behaviour changes (War Against Indiscipline – WAI) were limited. With hind sight, there are several reasons for this.

Some obvious reasons that more recent audience reception theories suggest, are the failure to properly consider the active nature of recipients of the intended for the messages, that is, their ability to negotiate the significance and meaning of messages, or the influence of their context of reception on such processes. Later models of development communication were aware of some of these issues, as closer attention was paid to the efficiency and effectiveness of communication in generating social equality through democratic participation in the media. With the newer paradigms, access of audiences to the media, their ability to participate in communication activities and the relevance of the communication activity within the sociocultural contexts was more important. These worked around the differences in the competencies of target groups in society; collective aspirations and perceived needs; and the consumption patterns of groups.

Clearly, in seeking to achieve its goals, development is necessarily involved with population. One can argue that there are critical cusps in the concerns of the two as population is also about improving the situation of individuals, irrespective of gender, generation or physical location – guaranteeing their rights to life and their overall well being. In deed population issues constitute a significant part of the broader development goals as they also seek to promote self actualisation for individuals and also for nations *within defined limits*. It is important to stress the clause because it shows the importance of global agreements such as the International Convention on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Millennium Development Goals, (MDG), and others like the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Without defined limits, the disparities in the experiences of various national populations will only persist unchecked. Yet by identifying and signing up to the basic standards acceptable, these limits become legal provisions for the quality of living that citizens can expect by right.

Perhaps due the structural inequalities that had persisted in societies over the years, and the attention to redress the concerns for women and the girl child, population issues seemed to have a female focus. But there is much more to population than the status of these critical groups (women and children), that is maternal and child health, access to family planning and fertility rates; access to education, and capital and economic activities. Population issues cover the reproductive rights of all, including

men. Reproductive Rights by definition encompasses the right to reproductive health as earlier mentioned, as well as the right of access to education, freedom from discrimination, right to information and liberty to participate in quality decision making. Women and men should by right, be able to take informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive practices that will not put them or others at risk. This includes child spacing, fertility, use of health care facilities and other such decisions within marriage, or about it. In other words, RR includes the right to developing personal capacity that will promote self sufficiency, prevent poverty and exploitation, particularly those activities that could be consequential to the reproductive capacity, and overall well being.

Population issues also cover age structures, sex ratios, the migratory trends within and between societies which inform the composition of societies and ultimately the ability of individuals and societies to realise their full potential. These are all tied in to the social incidence and control of poverty.

Population issues therefore have the domestic and public face, as do development goals in general. This is evident in the articulation of the goals, such as those set out at the International Conference on Population and Development which was held just over a decade ago (September 1994). In these, there was a deliberate strategy of integrating the links between population and development, thus emphasising sustainable human development. Amongst the five broad areas of concentration was the family, which calls attention to much that occurs within the domestic domain.

The family is the institution that can help to address critical reproductive practices. This includes the traditional practices on marriage, gender relations within the home, family decision making patterns, child bearing and rearing practices. There is evidence to suggest that the prevalent power relations, educational attainment and even forms of marriages affect the structure of the population. (Isuigo –Abanihe & Obono, Adewuyi 1999)

The other four areas identified in the ICPD namely, Environment and Consumption; Internal and International Migration; Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS, and Technology, Research and Development, also seriously depend on individuals adopting appropriate attitudes and behaviour. These include the economic aspirations, participation in economic activities, and perhaps more significantly are sexual behaviour patterns in the light of the challenges posed by the control of HIV /AIDS.

These ICPD goals are consistent with those enshrined in the 1995 4th World Conference of Women in Beijing, and more recently the Millennium Development Goals. In deed the promotion of these sorts of goals require audiences to actively consider their options and make appropriate choices. This is why the consideration of messages available to audiences within the media is not amiss.

The Merit of Situation Comedy

This paper will emphasize the dynamism of messages as well as the active nature of audiences. It is based on the theoretical foundation that audiences are discriminatory in the reception and interpretation of messages along varying lines possibly due to their social location, their education, age, gender; those factors that inform their sense of self. Consequently it can be argued that their reception of messages is not uniform; they can resist or be more amenable to certain kinds of messages, hence the choice to study for this paper, a media genre that is regarded as having a popular appeal. In spite of its universal popularity, situation comedy is a genre which tends to be ignored in academic circles for its banality. The paper will argue that this genre which is commonly deemed to be merely for entertainment is already in the business of

promoting values and particular types of behaviour. If this is the case, are these consistent with the development and population goals?

Situation comedy as a genre is one of the staples on television in different parts of the world. It is one of those programmes which serve as a focal point for family viewing. It is a genre that has been facilitated by the formulaic narrative and thematic structure. And although humour itself, as with many other media products is historically and culturally specific, American comedy programmes in particular have been distributed worldwide. They have been featured in prime slots, either as the centre piece of the evening viewing for particular audiences, or in the fringe of these slots, serving as a hammock for other programmes. Not only have sit-coms have dominated the prime time or family centred entertainment on American and British television, they have been widely distributed across the global market, (Hartley 2001) and they also enjoy longevity in the programming schedule (Coleman 2000). The same pattern is evident elsewhere, in Nigeria for example.

Due to its nature, situation comedy tends to be classified amongst the least objectionable programmes, which makes it a wise programming investment for poorer nations at two levels; importation and local production. The economics of programming encouraged the reliance on cheap syndicated programmes from abroad, so local audiences were exposed to the same American and British programmes that were syndicated globally. Stations also found investments in local varieties of sit-coms rewarding. In Nigeria, it was one of the first genres that the local TV industry tried to produce (Ikhime ed. 1979). As a result there has always been a proliferation of global and local sit com series in circulation. Since the plot formula tended to focus on family life (or work place situations) this pattern meant that a multiplicity of paradigms was available to viewers. This was the case even within America due to the differences in the discourses adopted in the course of the years. (Coleman 2000) With the expansion of television service through cable channels and satellite stations, access to these programmes, old and new, has become a lot more flexible.

Neale and Krutnik (1990) have identified characteristics and potentials of comedy in general; these revolve around the content, the structure, the affect and the tone of programmes in this genre. In the analysis of sitcoms therefore, there will be an examination of the themes that emanate for the plots, the characters, their relationship, the identity groups which they are made to represent, and the issues built around them. Also considered was the positioning of the viewer in relation to all these, in light of the usual television production conventions.

Distinct from the comic that is employed in many other genres to evoke laughter, comedy is not always expected to evoke laughter. It is a genre on its own, and may manifest in different forms, but always as light entertainment. The situation comedy is one of the forms which is characterised by its focus on the domestic environment, or work place as the case may be. It is marked by its ability to end on a happy note which implies that there will be acceptable resolution of the human problems that it foregrounds. Sit-coms characteristically focus on everyday life and the struggles of people within this. It is thus a usual forum for audiences to get "intimately acquainted" with the poor and neglected cadres in society (Grote 1983). Unlike some other elements of the popular culture, comedy provides a forum where the poor and rich converge, if only to share the same experiences, though they may not agree on what they see or hear.

The focus on the domestic sphere means that these programmes give an insight into real life domestic issues that result from the roles assigned to women in particular. However, there are no definite exclusion zones in the types of issues covered, and the range of representations to be had in comedy. Comedy is able to tackle sensitive subjects; it can deride the rich and privileged, ridicule the foolish and obnoxious; call attention to the plight of the underdog in a fashion that is none threatening and can then facilitate consideration of the issues raised in the programmes.

Since the situations revolve around the domestic or personal spaces, sit-coms bring to the fore social challenges which may otherwise be invisible, but no less consequential when the cumulative impact on the society is considered. One can then argue that sit-coms are important in the consideration and maintenance of the collective consciousness that informs the individual and social aspirations. This is a key step in the pursuit of development and population goals as they require both cognitive, and behaviour change on a massive scale. In as much as sit-coms provide a forum to encounter and negotiate social values, they have the potential to facilitate social change, if carefully harnessed. They could also serve to entrench existing ways of life. For these reasons it is expedient to consider the patterns of messages being disseminated in the genre.

Sit-coms are habit forming, and are often used to foster audience loyalty. It can be argued that sit-coms are a prized feature on the viewers' schedule. Like soap operas, the programmes present a range of characters with which viewers can develop a bond. Previous audience based studies have established the fact that audiences respond to these particular elements of this sort of production. Audiences in a Nigerian context for example were found to be fascinated by specific performers and their reputation, (the persona) the plots, characters, their mannerisms in a given role, their dressing, mastery of language especially the use of catchphrases which get adopted as slang and are used to mark belongingness. Added to the fascination with plots is the attention to the range of subjects treated in programmes. (Esan 1993)

Sit-coms, along with soap operas and films have been identified as windows through which family life is experienced in modern times. According to Chambers, (2001) these media forms have been involved in promoting ideal standards of family life. As with other media messages, this sort of promotion is not devoid of the ideological struggles but the dominant discourse is still held up for scrutiny. For example humour in sit-coms relied on the breaking of such codes about the race and class specific ideals about family life. Sit-coms capture the crisis which presses on the family from outside, and the disruptions experienced within. They draw on the weaknesses and dysfunctions amongst members of the family – presenting deplorable patterns of behaviour including infidelity, violence, alcoholism; or dealing with the scourge of illness, unemployment, poverty, and one could add to the list, new found wealth, rejection and illiteracy. Chambers argues that the narrative resolution typically conveyed the sentiments of the ideal white family: of caring commitment, loyalty, sacrifice, and permanence. Whilst this observation was made in reference to programmes of Western origins (British, American, and Australian) which dominated the global market for TV programmes in the 60s, the same argument can perhaps be made for local programmes which were developed to complement these considering the prevalent affinity for western values in the post colonial times. But in addition, there is a tendency for African humour to be used to deride the perceived wrongs in the society. It has been suggested that, “African humour is at the opposite pole to Western humour. Rather than developing cynicism and projection, it is a tragicomic

self derisiveness which restores emotion, and hence has a therapeutic value.” (Barlet, 2000)

We can expect that Western patterns of representing families has shifted over the years as more recent programmes present alternatives to what was regarded as the ideal. There are now representations of single parent (male or female headed) families. In some cases the programmes acknowledge the extended family, with grandparents, and siblings living with the nuclear family. Today there is also recognition of the step families, and even friends who cohabit. This trend is more apparent in the comedies of the nineties. Chambers (op cit) has observed that these modern sitcoms celebrate difference; showing the family being tolerant and inclusive; presenting examples of successful families in other races, and still bearing a tale of morality. Though these may reflect changes in ways of life, the influence of improved technology and wider access to television signals in the global market should not be discounted. The observed shifts may also have occurred as a result of the increased scope for participation in TV programme syndication business; niche marketing which has encouraged and engagement with diversity issues. All these support the claim that the genre possesses serious potentials for offering critical options to a wide range of audiences.

There have been concerns about the tendency of drama and sit-coms to trivialise the problems of daily life, by the use of artificial happy endings. According to Lyons, such concern is to do with another aspect of the format. How can such grave family problems be resolved within the half hour that is the standard length of sitcoms? Unlike the soap opera which serialises the storyline, sit-coms are usually series of discrete episodes. The subject thus has to be carefully selected and tactfully resolved. Lyons (2003) identified a catalogue of problems that do not appear suited to a programme whose mission is to entertain. These include domestic violence, severe poverty, alcoholism, abandonment, and incest. As she observes, judgments about propriety exists within value systems, so whilst such issues may appear alien to comedy within a western paradigm, they are not necessarily anathema in local alternatives. In deed comedy is both historical and culturally specific. Consequently those issues which once appeared to be taboo have been the covered in sit-coms. This has been facilitated by the use of a range of modes – including slapstick, satires and parodies. In some cases, it appears that the use of exaggeration or animations (and other innovative techniques of production) places situations inspired by grittier aspects of reality, on the edge of incredulity or fantasy, making more tolerable, the cataloguing of such within the frame of light entertainment. Regardless of the disagreement on how it works, the subversive potentials of sit-coms (operating as carnivalesque) both in the political and social spheres have been acknowledged (Fiske 1987). As Feuer (2001 pg 70) notes, “The sit-com has been the perfect format for illustrating current ideological conflicts while entertaining an audience.” If the potentials are to be maximised, a concerted effort, such as those used in social marketing may be employed.

Social Marketing and Situation Comedies

Social marketing is an approach that has adopted the commercial marketing techniques to address social and health problems. Applying lessons from the communicative processes employed for the advertising and sale of goods, to the promotion of clearly defined acceptable social ideas, it often aims for behaviour change. This makes it appropriate for the achievement of population and development

goals. It requires careful analysis, planning implementation and evaluation of the intervention programmes.

The approach entails a disciplined alignment of prospects (audiences) and resources for a particular end. The resources include the vehicles of communication (programmes, channels of dissemination), and the approach (the message strategy, characterisation) calls for a deliberate analytical engagement of the communication process. It also includes a consideration of the competition; what obstacles could the message confront on its path to the receiver, and how can these be overcome. It is premised on the efficacy of the media systems to deliver the intended message, and evoke the desired behaviour change. Views of media influence may still be subject to debate but the social marketing approach compels change agents to be mindful of critical processes.

The framework consists of the 4 Ps – product, price, place, and promotion, like the commercial precursor. Thus social change agents are encouraged to consider closely their message objectives, their target audiences, the cost and context of reception. Though the initial social marketing efforts took quite a literal translation of the marketing model, and product was narrowly defined (as condoms, and specific family planning services) there has since been a more liberal application of the model to the promotion of social issues as well as public health programmes. (Piotrow et al 1997, pg 19) In deed there are examples of good practice especially with soap operas (Nariman, 1993) and if more widely adopted, such discipline could make media practice become more socially responsible. In the following section analysis of a sample of sit-coms is presented.

Analysis of selected texts

For the purpose of this study a selection of contemporary Western and African sitcoms were examined. These were programmes running on various terrestrial and Sky digital channels. Whilst the British and American programmes were more readily available due to the scheduling patterns, the Nigerian example in particular would have been disadvantaged but copies were obtained from a Nigerian source.

Though only four programmes will be reviewed closely in here, many more programmes had been studied. As should be expected, there was a surplus of American sit-coms, especially with channels like Trouble (Sky channel 607) providing a dedicated service. Interactive Digital Sales service website reports that the Trouble is the 3rd most popular cable or satellite channel. In the study period, (quarter ending April 2005) the station did very well amongst 16 – 24 year olds, being more popular than E4 and MTV in the UK. Five of the top ten programmes were closely examined. This includes *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *One on One*, *Grounded for Life*, *All About the Andersons*. Only *My Wife and Kids* which had the highest rating will be discussed in depth in here. These are examples of American programmes.

My Wife and Kids presents an example of an ideal family with the man (Michael Kyle) his wife and three children. In keeping with the predominantly youthful target audience, the programme tends to revolve around the challenges of the children in coping with adolescent life. It has dealt expressly with such risky issues as male involvement in teen age pregnancy, parental responsibility, sexual attraction, gender empowerment, sexual harassment and even masturbation. The father –mother, and parent-child dialogues on these issues are set up to facilitate the communication of serious negotiation on these issues with the audience, albeit in a light hearted way. At

times, the information is placed in the mouth of an expert, like a doctor. It is thus a veritable source of education on these critical issues. Communication is so easy among them that even the non verbal communication is made humorous.

The couple have been constructed as equal partners and even though they have their weaknesses, they are still likable and respected, by their children. They also earn the respect of the audience, especially as they laugh together and laugh at themselves.

The mother is the pillar in the home, and in spite of her domestic responsibilities, she receives encouragement to actualise her academic and business potentials. This is important because due to the marriage and child bearing, her progress had been disrupted in the past. She helps her husband to see reason when his thoughts are clouded by fear, anger or such emotions. But there are occasions when the roles are reversed, and she it is who needs to be supported. Although she could be quite a schemer, she is not devious. She is thus more appropriately described as resourceful and tactful; a modern African American woman with conservative values. This character will suggest that parenting requires tact, and femininity requires wit. These are values that she passes on to her daughters.

The father is the provider in the home but he does not create the impression of being a boss, although he is. He is the protector of the family against external aggression. Usually this calls for his wit, or his money. He is savvy in the ways of the world and will offer a bribe if need be. His authority is not derived from brute force as is typical of the alpha male figure. He is an example of a new man who is not threatened by the progress of a female; he would reason with his wife and the children. Yet in this household, roles are still assigned along the traditional lines. The woman is the one who cooks, helps the children with their homework, and deals with the domestic emergencies. The girls are still counselled by the mother whilst the son's counselling is the father's responsibility. This is extended to the children's boyfriend and girlfriend.

The teenage children are quite regular teenagers, though the male child is construed as dim, he is homely, hard working; unlike the stereotype of the black urban youth such as conveyed in the Fresh Prince. He has joined his father in the family business, but the audience has seen him as a teenage father, struggling with the lessons in responsibility. He had however been through his phase of searching for love or acceptance, though he never quite seems to express strong ambitions for financial wealth. He lives with his young family in the garage in the family home. By constructing him as a problem, the programme is able to address the often absent male dimensions of reproductive rights. Thus it promotes the equality of rights and responsibilities in these sensitive matters.

The older daughter is perhaps the more cerebral, like her mother. This is a paradigm which may have interesting resonance amongst global audiences as it raises the questions about the redefinition of the value system. How valuable is education really if it is now presented as a "woman's thing"? Yet the representation seems to suggest a pattern that already exists. Perhaps this representation affords the opportunity of negotiation of these values. But the character defies the trend in another way, she is in relationship with a God fearing young man, and they both struggle with the adolescent drives. This is often construed as a joke, adding to the humour of the show. The success of the strategy which uses laughter to highlight this behaviour pattern as an acceptable option for young viewers should be tested.

There is a younger daughter in the family who will not be discussed here. Suffice to say that unlike many young people her age, she is protected and provided for. She is also in relationship that is exploited for the humour in the show, through the musical

prodigy that she is pitched with. This may be a signifier of the fact that male-female relationships are natural and wholesome.

Meal times are family times in this family. It is a forum for discussion and discovery of achievements and vulnerability. They also have pockets of times when they play together, or they just chat. This provides opportunity for the transmission of cultural heritage. Unlike other sit-coms of the times, there is a responsible orientation to sex, and there are limits to the gratuitous exhibition of passion. But the programme is not sterile. It is still popular amongst the audiences as mentioned earlier.

On the whole this is a comedy about a family which in spite of all its foibles is desirable. This is a middle class African-American family, and the parents were themselves teenage parents who have managed to do well in spite of all odds. Here they perpetuate the myth of the American dream, but in so doing become role models for other ethnic minorities and global audiences. What is more important perhaps is that it conveys the message about the security of the family; the sanctity of marriage, the trust that is built up therein and the courage with which individuals can go away to face the world.

My Family is the British example in the sample. This is a BBC programme which is also accessible on UKTV Gold and in due course, could be accessible to audiences in Africa via the BBC Prime channel.¹ The programme was selected for its representation of a white middle class family, and unlike *My Parents are Alien*, or *My Hero* is more down to earth. It is also more contemporary in setting than some other options like *Keeping Up Appearances* which is programme comedy currently on BBC Prime schedule.

The programme presents an example of the traditional white middle-class family structure, with the man (Ben Harper), his wife (Susan) and three children. In the African context, with the preference for male children, the gender ratio in this family may have been admirable as there are 2 sons and a daughter. But the parent-child relationship is most un-African. This is evident in the manner of communication, the concept of family fun for example. The situation is compounded by the quirkiness of Nick the first son, who does not seem able to hold any position of responsibility, and impervious to reason in spite of his age.² In the course of the series, Nick has fancied himself in different exotic roles; including being a gorilla, Jesus Christ Superstar, an exorcist and even a drag queen. He is a philanderer of sorts; with none of his amorous relationships lasting long. What is worse is that he is a liability especially to his father who has to pay for his folly. The fact that he has been known to turn up in his parents' bed with a girlfriend, speaks of his disrespect, but because of his demeanour, this act is more to be regarded as evidence of his dimwit.

In deed, the fact that the woman of the house takes the unilateral decision allowing her mother to sleep in her marital bed, raises questions about the sanctity of the bed. If regarded as a metaphor for marital sex, then this becomes more significant. On different occasions, there were nearly unintended perverted sexual encounters, when the man (Ben Harper) jumped into bed only to discover that the person in it was other than his wife. In one case it was his son and the girlfriend, in another it was his mother in law. Yet he was blamed for these misdemeanours.

¹ This channel is available world wide, (including Middle East and Africa) via the cable and satellite transmissions.

² The actual age is not known but we can deduce that he is in his 20s as he is expected to have moved out of the family home, and his younger sister has gained entry into the university.

In the earlier series, the younger son was portrayed as dutiful and conscientious character. The role – reversal technique made him be the sanest person in the family, but as he grew into adolescence he has also become preoccupied with other concerns especially boy – girl relationships. He is constantly looking to score with the girls. He also became assertive to the point of defiance and intolerant of both parents.

The father-daughter relationship is one which was not featured so frequently in the later series. Through this character the situation (privileges, responsibilities and pressures) of the girl child in British context should have been evident. The character (Janie) had the privilege of a university education, a supportive family and parents who were considerate providers of material need and counsel. She was also at liberty to make her choices even when she was in error. An example of this was when she maintained several “boyfriends” who “helped her with her studies”. Her indignation at her father’s counsel was most revealing. Rather than be remorseful, she was angry that the father likened her to a prostitute, (her own reading not his words) and cowered him into offering an apology. She had always been an independent female, and her parents often resorted to careful scheming to communicate with her.

Through the older Janie the audience was also able to explore the challenges of a young mother, single parent but these are not discussed here. They were not central to the plots examined as she had moved out of home. Initially her absence from the nest was due to her being away in university, and thereafter her sham of a wedding at which she fell in love with the best man.

The female relative (Abi) who moved in with the family, filled the void of her absence from home. Whilst she was a joy in that she was more amenable in her ways, she was no less a liability in that she was accident prone and also had her fair share of relationship angst. She is a likable dimwit; an art school undergraduate whose desire is to find love and a good job. .

There is an obsession with sex among young and old without consideration for consequences. To the chagrin of the children, the parents have been shown making love on the kitchen table, in the cloakroom, the sofa and in their bedroom. This may speak of a healthy relationship, unlike their childish arguments. Yet it may account for the children’s disrespect for them.

In all, the children in this family were a cross to the parents. Though they had the opportunity to contribute to the family and society, there was little evidence of any meaningful preparation, even when modest success was recorded. Janie dropped out of university to pursue business, Nick was constantly involved in hare brained schemes and Michael brilliant though he was, was very selfish.

Susan, the mother lived in perpetual guilt of being a bad mother. She is a bad cook, a poor housekeeper, though the home is never really in disarray. Her housekeeping deficiency lies in the inability to maintain discipline amongst her children. Though she is observant and able to pick up on their faults, she lacks the courage to discuss serious issues with them. She passes the pressure to the husband. With him, she is assertive, eloquent and cunning, but with the children she is lax. Her liberty would have been an achievement for the cause of women, but for the negative elements in her character. She is domineering, manipulative and sometimes wicked. Perhaps she can be described as an unruly woman, who must always have her way.

It is no surprise that the man of the house is emasculated. He lives in perpetual frustration, with outbursts of rage that amount to nothing; commands no respect in his

home in spite of his professional achievement as a dentist. Yet this couple remain relevant as the family home is still the haven, and the father still useful to pay the bills. It will appear that this particular programme is not suited to the task of promoting ideals required to achieve the MDG goals. This may be due to the type of humour, as clearly the programme does not actually sanction the above patterns, yet it does not explicitly condemn them. It leaves this up to the audience to make of the programme what they will.

The following examples of African programmes air on channels in Ghana and Nigeria respectively. *Taxi driver* is an example of a Ghanaian sit-com that is aired on the Original Black Entertainment (OBE) TV Sky channel 223. Although the central character is TT the taxi driver, the programme still affords the opportunity of viewing family life through TT's family and that of his boss, Richard. There is also the *synthetic family* structure that exists in the taxi rank amongst the drivers and touts. This is demonstrated in the way that they look out for each other, mindful of each other's welfare. In this is the lesson of good neighbourliness; the reassertion of the customary African definition of family within the cosmopolitan space.

Because the programme follows the taxi driver in the course of his job, it is liberated to address a wider scope of issues. It uses a range of socially recognisable types to address serious social problems in humorous ways. This includes inequity in gender relations, patriotism, honesty, obtaining money under false pretext, extortion, exploitation, consideration. It should be noted that the gender imbalance presented on the show does not necessarily favour women. Sometimes women are the protagonists, who seek to use their sexuality and position to oppress the men. The programme has also dealt with more gritty aspects of life, like prostitution, condom use, HIV/AIDS, mental health, economic empowerment, poverty, along with the usual teenage antics that is explored through Aboagye, Richard's live-in nephew.

There are no direct parent child relationships explored in the programme, other than references to absent parents and relatives in the village. Aboagye bears the burden of representation for the younger generation and like those in Western programmes, he is fun loving, looking for the good life; which he construes as having money to spend on parties with lots of girls and drinks. He is forever getting into scrapes at the expense of his uncle. Richard is therefore no less burdened than men in the West. He is also hen pecked by his wife, even though he pretends to be the one in charge. This may account for his incessant adulterous relationships. This was not the case with his western counterparts who curtail their desires for women to their wives.

Between Richard, Aboagye, and the views expressed through other minor characters, women chasing appears to be a normal behaviour pattern. But the audience is left in no doubt that this is unacceptable behaviour, either through the voice of reason that is offered in the dialogue, (through one of the other characters), or by TT in his role as the moralizer of the programme. This is usually done in an aside to the camera, or at the end when he engages the viewer directly in the review of the main events of the episode. There is also the use of props to convey messages subliminally, through messages on posters or promotional T shirts for example. This is possible because they are part of the usual backdrop of the society, attesting to the activities of other change agents. Perhaps such activities explain the high level of awareness of the MDG and ICPD issues that is apparent in the programmes. In their treatment of the issues, there is a similarly high congruence with the desired goals. Yet the viewers readings of these cannot be taken for granted.

Fuji House of Commotion is the Nigerian example that will be discussed, even though it was studied along with *Papa Ajasco* (aired on BEN television, Sky channel 184). Although there are no actual ratings figures for these programmes, there is evidence of their immense popularity within the countries of origin, and amongst audiences in the Diaspora. In response to a query on a Nigerian website, it was the unequivocal choice as the most popular comedy, followed by *Papa Ajasco*. In another strand of the discussion, various members of the Fuji family were selected as the most favoured character. Top on the list was the Chief Fuji himself, but there was also his three wives, though Peace was singled out, and the children. Evidently the Fuji family is a busy one.

Fuji House of Commotion is a spin off from a very successful soap opera that was on national television³. Chief Fuji is a traditional Yoruba man; a polygynist with 3 wives under the same roof. He is wealthy but stingy towards his wives and children. It is a cat and mouse game to get him to part with his money for others, but he will spend it on himself. Although he can be passionate and enrapt in his wives (and girlfriends) he comes across more often as a strict disciplinarian; his catch phrase is a threat to invoke a curse; not even his wives are spared his wrath. Yet in the face of extreme external aggression, such as comes from free loading relatives, angry tenants, he is a coward who hides behind his fiery wife – Peace, an ironic nomenclature.

Peace is the second wife, but she stands out. She is from a different ethnic group from the rest of the household, and often kicks against the norms, standing up to the chief when all others cringe. Yet, she remains his favourite, fondly called “Sweet yellow paw-paw” because of her complexion or “Rebel leader”. This label evokes memories of the Nigerian civil war and also helps to fix the identity of Peace as an Igbo woman. The appreciation of her complexion gives an indication of the concept of beauty. Although Peace is defiant, and outspoken she is also considerate, although when the chips are down, she will be partial to her children. As expressed in the programme’s signature tune, Peace is confusion – she is not afraid to break the ranks.

This is just one model of womanhood that is featured in the programme.

Wife number 1 (Kunbi) is another, the conservative Yoruba woman. She comports herself with dignity as the matriarch in the home, rising above the petty rivalries. As most of her children are grown up, and she has the privileged position, that makes rivalry unnecessary. Rather, she is the arbiter in the home. Her husband deems her the most dutiful, seeing as she is more steeped in the traditional ways, but she has the younger wives to assist in the running of the home. She is uneducated; however, she is no fool as she is able to manipulate the man, without the rancour that is characteristic of the firebrand. She is cunning, though perhaps this could also be read as devious. She is the man’s companion.

Wife number 3 is described in the signature tune as commotion. She is a modern younger Yoruba woman, who is caught between the bonds of tradition and the liberating influence of her education. Clearly the influence of the former is so deep that unlike Peace, this character does not help viewers challenge the offences in the way things are done. As a university graduate, she is the trophy for the chief, when he wants to wield influence within a western paradigm.

The character Ireti (meaning Hope) offers an opportunity to view the plight of a childless woman, as she is often little more than a house help. Whilst it may serve as a deterrent for young girls who aspire to engage in a polygynous marriage for the

³ Checkmate (directed by Amaka Igwe) was one of the long running soaps on Nigerian television in the 1990s.

promise of wealth, one can argue that the contrast that is offered in Wife Number 2 may undermine this. In any case the programme gives an opportunity to see this type of relationship devoid of the glamorous images of real polygynists that appear in the gossip news columns.

There is a large brood of children in Fuji house, but a couple of them will be singled out for discussion. The older daughter of Peace (Rebel Leader), like her mother, is non conformist. She is known in the house as Fighter and Bomber or *Esu kekere* (Little devil). One can argue that this type of labelling may not augur well for the development goal of establishing peace and stability. The more these types of ideas about the particular identity group get fixed in the public consciousness, the more the aggression that may be provoked. This may have serious repercussions in a cosmopolitan society with a history of inter ethnic conflicts.

The other child to be highlighted is the one with hearing impairment. Through him the plight of the disabled child is explored. Fuji household is a rowdy one. The programme affords the opportunity of confronting issues around domestic violence that exist in such home; the types between man and wife, parent and child, amongst the children, amongst the wives, and between different families. As with all the others, without any allowances for his disability, this child must learn to survive in such a place.

In the Fuji household all the children are subject to oppression, bullying and intimidation, neglect, violence and incessant verbal abuse, perpetuated first by their father, and then his wives and others, all in the name of discipline. As one of the children complained in one of the episodes, “We smell the meat, they eat it.” The children are thus trapped as the *Other* in a society that privileges age, rank and status. They, within their ranks, continue to perpetuate this.

The children have been schooled that education is their escape route from this nightmare, but they are also confronted with the breakdown in infrastructure. For the one with disability, the frustration is a lot more and his immediate aspiration to emigrate to America, is a desire that the father cannot afford to support. With their education, the children recognise their rights and are disgruntled so much that they planned a strike with the help of the older ones who are university undergraduates. However, they still have not found the approach to resolve the obnoxious ways. With every attempt to change the order, a resolution of the situation returns them to the status quo. Because the programme is clearly a social commentary, this dismal picture is discouraging as there is evidence of the deeply ingrained structures remain. The language is an example of the mindset that perpetuates these inequitable power relations.

“*Olowo ori mi*” Euphemism for the husband meaning the one who paid the dowry or The owner of my head.

Oko mi – endearment for the husband or his children, meaning my husband, thus empowering them, at the expense of the wife

Senior / Brother/ Sister as prefix to a name to indicate deference by the speaker.

Clearly there are ways of circumventing this system, and the terms may be used in jest, or as part of cunning schemes to lull the powerful into a false sense of security. If the Igbo woman has been cast in the mould of belligerence, the Yoruba women have been placed in this mould of hypocrisy. In deed, all the women have been presented as experts of deception. Food which is in their forte is a weapon of warfare. Special dishes are cooked to get favours, this may be spiked with salt or pepper, before being offered to formidable adversaries who seek to extort favours from the ‘helpless’ woman, so that what they see is not what they get.

But cunning is not the exclusive preserve of the women. The men also have their own means of extracting favours from others. Within the marriage relation, sex, attention affection and money are the baits. In polygynous relationships conjugal rights are rotated, in this case by the week, but the man reserves the right to break the order. When seduction fails, verbal violence, physical violence and deprivation are the weapons. For outsiders, their wit is their weapon, and when this fails, they may invoke the gods, or other sentiments, and as a last resort, violence. Though these patterns may evoke laughter they could have serious repercussions in that they may constitute obstacles to the evolution of a culture of trust and cooperation that is required for nation building.

In spite of their age, the adolescents in Fuji household do not have the type of liberties that their contemporaries in other parts of the world have, though even they are very aware of sexual relations. Much of their activities are conducted underground which leaves little room for open discussion about sex education. Again, the audience is left to figure out what they will take from the programme. There are no direct asides to the camera to establish the intended message thus making the interpretation of the programme more democratic. If this strategy does not work, then the opportunity provided by this resource to negotiate the acceptable resolution of a myriad of issues is lost.

Conclusion

Situation comedies have been defined as light entertainment. It is subject to the dilemmas of this classification of programmes. According to entertainment is “the performance or a spectacle that captures the interest or attention of an individual, giving pleasure, amusement, or some form of gratification.” This attests to the relaxed disposition with which the viewer arrives at the viewing context, when all other things are equal. This disposition should make them more amenable to reason, and the genre can therefore engage with a range of subjects, including those social taboos that very often hinder the achievement of population and development goals.

Sit-coms have been used to exhibit concepts of family, sexuality, class relations, and even gender or generational role assignments. There are opportunities to examine parent-child relationships, man-woman relationships, issues of friendship and patterns of communication, as well as issues of trust. The theatrical quality of everyday life that is performed in sit-coms provides the viewers opportunities for self reflection but this may depend on how the messages are structured. This runs counter to the assumption that viewers are passive or cultural dopes. Rather, it affirms the thinking that viewers are active in their engagement with culture, and even within play and light entertainment, serious home truths can still be traded.

The genre has taken on social and political norms helping viewers to question, endorse, reject, or rework acceptable standards. It can be argued that in the struggle of differing world views, using comedy may produce a placebo effect, in that it gives but an illusion of empowerment to the marginalised groups, when in fact there is no change in the status quo. Even if this were the case, the opportunity to present challenges or alternatives into the public domain is gain even if all it does is to close the gap between the information poor and the elites. It may well be that the genre only gives an illusion of public debate but even an opportunity for private scrutiny, personal reflection, an even domestic debate is of considerable value for social change. There is evidence to show that audiences in Nigeria come to the viewing experience with the express intention of acquiring capital with which to negotiate their daily

challenges, and TV programmers there also produce messages with the intention of exposing social ills for people to learn from. This is without prejudice to the desire to be entertained. (Esan 1993) This is consistent with the findings of Hermes (1995) on the pleasures that readers derive from reading gossip magazines.

The problem-solution format adopted in sit-coms makes it possible to exemplify the antecedents and consequences of pro-social versus antisocial behaviour. This means that even if it does not eventually help secure a change in behaviour, it can be effective at other levels within the behaviour change process. It can help to create awareness, facilitate analysis of prevalent situation, evaluate alternatives, to maintain internal dialogue and so on. Perhaps the adoption of a concerted effort such as the social marketing approach can be used to effect desired change. One of the challenges here will be how to harness the enormous commercial interests that are tied into the TV industry. This is an area to be further explored. But an issue for immediate action, is the need to disseminate critical information to the creative industries who are responsible for a vast array of information that informs public consciousness. It is up to them to use as they please, but in the first instance, the producers of such messages, need to be aware of issues, the goals, and the appropriate patterns of relationship required for sustainable human development.

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