

Pragmeme of Political Humour in Selected Nigerian Political Cartoons

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Political humour is a recurring element in print media and other genres, touching various areas of Nigerian political discourse. A number of research studies have investigated political humour in contemporary Nigerian political discourse. The political humour deployed in responding to some prominent political events in 2016, however, is relatively unexplored. This current endeavour, therefore, attempts to examine the pragmeme of humour in selected 2016 political events that are remediated in political cartoons. These include political matters such as *Nigeria's 56th Independence Anniversary*, the *crusade against corruption*, which Muhammadu Buhari commenced when he became the President of Nigeria, and the alleged *2016 budget padding scandal* that rocked the House of Representatives. The frameworks for the study comprise Flanson and Barrett's Encryption Theory of Humour and Mey's Pragmeme Theory. The six political cartoons that were subjected to discourse interpretations were culled from *Aprokotoons Media*, Nigeria's foremost internet-based cartoon journal with a large collection of relevant cartoon resources for print and electronic media. The results revealed that audiences who were well informed on these political activities were able to decrypt the cartoons because they shared the same key political knowledge as the cartoonist. Thus, honest laughter is produced, but on the other hand, the cartoons' essential features are subordinated to the pragmeme of humour of idle campaign promises and Nigeria's hopeless condition at 56; self-centred leadership, lawmakers who are lawbreakers, and that the worst form of corruption is selective justice. Hence, these findings enhance the public perception of the country's political actors, and underscore the need for rethinking the sensibility of political acts, promises, and decisions.

Keywords: encryption theory; political cartoon; political humour; pragmeme

Introduction

Humour, a natural phenomenon in human society, is as old as the use of language for human communications. In its different forms of verbal and non-verbal expressions, humour has the potential to consciously or unconsciously evoke laughter from an audience. Different spheres of human activity have generated specific and general humour to address issues of personal and general concern. In contemporary society, one of the general concerns of individuals is how their society is governed by administrators who are either elected or appointed. Often times, modern democracy has encouraged changes of power through elections and as a result, politicians are released to engage in the political game of election or re-election. These politicians deploy verbal and non-verbal language resources to attract public attention and to disparage their opponents. Nigerian politicians, for example, use humour in their language use with specific reference to their political experience in their immediate environment.

Against the background of the use of humour by Nigerian politicians, the Nigerian media has resorted to the use of humour (in this context, political humour) to satirise the misdemeanour of political leaders in the political landscape of the country. This is common in both print and online media in the form of political cartoons. Nearly all Nigerian Newspapers such as Punch, Daily Trust, The Guardian, and The Nation have sections for political cartoons on topical issues in the country. Political cartoons contain "both a visual and a textual message on political events presented through cultural symbols" (Gocek, 1998).

The epicentre of this paper, therefore, is on political humour as one potent tool that reflects on and conveys

paradigms of shared Nigerian political events in some selected Nigerian political cartoons. In this context, political humour is taken as an honest signal of shared common knowledge, attitudes, and preferences (Flamson & Barret, 2008). This position is relatively in tandem with a pragmatic theory, especially the theory of pragmeme, which situates speech acts (political humour being one) in the appropriate sociocultural context. Based on this background, our paper examines the pragmeme of political humour – linguistic and non-linguistic interpretive communicative resources being instantiated in Nigerian political cartoons, to target audience perceptions and stimulate political volte-face. With this intent, the paper claims that much of the verbal and non-verbal (pictorial) acts associated with political humour are dependent on the exigencies of rethinking the sensibility of political acts, promises, and decisions.

Political cartoons and political humour

Cartoons and humour are media reserves that have immemorially maintained an undeniable presence and influence in the communication of the age-old social institution known as politics. Based on this communicative role played by cartoons and humour, the two have preserved a symbiotic relationship with politics; thus, they are known as political cartoons and political humour in extant literature. Political cartoons have been avowed to be powerful communicative weapons used to satirise governments without incurring the wrath of the affected persons and institutions. They are capable of engendering distractions and instilling jokes. The significance of political cartoons also lies in the fact that they are able to give socio-political commentaries on vital areas of reality. In the words of Edwards and Winkler (1987:306), a political cartoon is “a graphic presentation typically designed in one-panel, non-continuing format to make an independent statement or observation on political events or social policy”. Such statements or observations may often serve to undermine, unsettle, and oppose excesses of power consumption and authority, and as such they may be viewed as ‘weapons of the weak’, providing expressions of resistance and solidarity in opposition to political leaders and elites (Hammett, 2012). It is little wonder that Brown (2012:1) asserts that “from the printing press to the internet, political cartoons and imagery have proven to be invaluable tools of resistance while also posing serious threats to the governments they target”. However, with these critical assignments rendered by cartoons, their role is not accredited and considered significant because of the poor cognition of some audiences. Through its channel (print media), political cartoons are seen as elitist weapons due to the small audience that can decipher the message. Thus, they tend to be an overlooked means of political discourse. Nonetheless, they are rhetorical texts that assist not only in interpreting and framing political discourse, but offering symbolic constructions of political and national identities (Edwards & McDonald, 2010), and consequently offer readers a clear, although possibly slanted, view of politicians/public figures in the political scenes.

Political humour includes any humorous text that not only makes reference to politics, but achieves the goal of politics by dealing with political issues, people, processes, events, or institutions. It is known to be a communicative resource for spotting, highlighting, and attacking incongruities originating in political discourse and action (Tsakona & Popa, 2011, Chun, 2004, & Warner, 2007). These incongruities are those political shortcomings that constitute a deviation from political norms, and consequently, in view of this nonconformity, become undoubtedly source material for the media. Political humour informs its audience about this political reality, and points out that this is, in fact, an incongruous reality (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). It commonly evolves into jokes or satirical verbal and non-verbal genres that accompany political commentary, comic sketches aiming to ridicule the blunders of politicians ruling the country: their decisions, behaviour, or attitudes (Poprawa, n.d.); which could be in the forms of incompetence, recklessness, or corruption, among others.

Political humour is one of the tasks of political cartoons, and it is prevalent in this media genre (political cartoons) because of its communicative potential without serious fear of reprisal. Although political cartoons may appear to be superficial, there is actually more to their triviality than meets the eyes. For every significant political discourse, cartoonists are able to extract vital news items, and in turn, replicate them with pictorial humorous edges in order to appeal to their readership. Consequently, by distilling political arguments and criticism into clear, easily digestible (and at times grossly caricatured) statements, they have oiled our political debate and helped shape public opinion (Greste, 2015). In a similar manner, they are able to engage their audience in politics and in the reasonableness of political acts and decisions (Tsakona & Popa, 2011). This audience involvement has been affirmed in Greste’s (2015: I) when he signals that “we all love a good political cartoon. Whether we agree with the underlying sentiment or not, the biting wit and the sharp insight of a well-crafted caricature and its punch line are always deeply satisfying.”

Humour, in politics, could be deployed by a cartoonist in three major ways, namely irony, satire, and sarcasm. In other words, political humour could be characteristically ironical, satirical, or sarcastic in its functions. If it is ironical, it portends that the literal meaning of what is presented is the opposite of what is intended; and should it be satirical, it exposes and denounces vices, follies, abuses, and casts judgement by scorning and ridiculing; through sarcasm, it praises but such acclaims are invectives.

A number of scholarly considerations have been directed to political humour. These research interests could be attributed to the dominance of hybrid forms of political reports over the years. For instance, Harris (2009)¹ and Dynel (2011) investigated humour in the American presidential race of 2008 and Polish pre-election debates of 2007 respectively. Mueller (2011), Archakis and Tsakona (2011), and Saftoiu and Popescu (2014) examined humour in parliamentary proceedings. Mueller probed into humour in the German Bundestag (German House of Representatives); with a focus on amusement and laughable parliamentary situations, Archakis and Tsakona (2011) considered humour in Greek parliamentary debates, while Saftoiu and Popescu (2014) attempted the construction and consolidation of the political brand 'The Tribune-Jester' in relation to the use of ethnic humour in the form of joking in Romania parliamentary discourse made by Corneliu Vadim Tudor. In the study of political humour in Nigerian political discourse, Taiwo (2007) made an enquiry into how Nigerian writers creatively and manipulatively deploy morphological and lexico-semantic nuances to ridicule politicians and the Nigerian Police Force. In the same vein, Abioye (2009) investigated satirical style as a source of literary comment in selected Nigerian newspapers. The work observed a general lack of knowledge of satire as a stylistic device, how it could be deployed effectively and, that writers find it safer to use indirect methods of criticising because of repression fears. On the internet, Adegoju and Oyeboade (2015) engaged in the patterns of humour evidenced in the use of internet memes in the online campaign of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. The study revealed that memes serve the subversive purposes of detracting from the electoral value of the targets. On the other hand, Ogbo and Nuhu (2016) also explored satire as a form of imagery to depict some political issues in cartoons contained in some Nigerian national dailies.

These aforementioned scholarly works are brilliant efforts on political humour. However, it should be affirmed here that sufficient scholarly attention has not been given to the political humour deployed in responding to some prominent political events in Nigeria in the year 2016. This current endeavour therefore attempts to examine the pragmeme of political humour in recent political events within the Nigerian political climate in selected political cartoons. These are political topics such as *Nigeria's 56th Independence Anniversary* (in 2016), the *crusade against corruption* that Muhammadu Buhari commenced when he became the President of Nigeria, and the alleged *2016 budget padding scandal* that rocked the House of Representatives.

Theoretical Insights

The theoretical base of this article is eclectic, amalgamating insights from Flamson and Barrett's Encryption Theory of Humour and Mey's Pragmeme Theory. The two are briefly discussed in sequence, together with how they stand to adequately interpret the selected political cartoons for this paper.

The heart of Flamson and Barrett's theory of encryption-decryption stands in the submission that intentionally produced humour honestly signals the fact that speaker and audience share information, enabling the assessment of relative similarity and social assortment for compatibility over time (Flamson & Bryant, 2013). The impression given by this humour theory is that, essentially, humorous productions come with layers of inference of a speaker's meaning, the majority of which rely on access to implied information on the part of the conveyer of humour and the audience. The encryption model, thus, emanates from the notion that humour is an encoded form of communicative act, a message-based mechanism, whose inherent meaning could only be decrypted if its target audience has possession of a "key", that is, the common knowledge, attitudes, and preferences required to derive the implied messages contained in the piece. The degree to which the encrypted message seems non-random to key-holders strengthens the 'manifestness' of the speaker's possession of the key (Flamson & Bryant, 2013). This encrypted aspect of humour, in the words of Flamson and Barret (2008:262), "explains both a pervasive proximate aspect of humour (the non-random fit between the explicit information in jokes and the implicit background knowledge they refer to) and its ultimate function as a social assortment device", that is, its potency for engendering affiliations with compatible local peers.

¹ Harris, M. K. (2009). The political application of humor. Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects. Retrieved from https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/497

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Within the encryption theory, humour is taken to have a pragmatic thrust, considering the fact that it is capable of indexing a mammoth amount of background information. Accordingly, Flamson and Barrett (2013) argue that encryption/humour is a special case of inferential communication that can be proximately described through relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). They propose that humour:

...is a special encrypted form of ostensive behaviour that relies on principles of relevance to produce certain cognitive effects, but in such a way that some effects will only be made manifest to those who have a sufficiently similar cognitive environment to derive that implicit content. Audience members that do not share the cognitive environment with the speaker will derive more mundane inferences of speaker meaning, unaware of the encrypted information that has been conveyed. (2013:57)

The encryption and decryption process of humour is a cognitive effect that is considered a special form of relevance. A cognitive effect is obviously an adjustment in an individual's representation of the world. When a cognitive effect is positive, it is worth having. Other things being equal, the more positive cognitive effects something humorous spontaneously evokes in the audience, the more relevant it is. However, the more processing efforts involved in deriving its cognitive effects, the less relevant it is. A humorous text is especially relevant to any audience by virtue of its modest contextual effects on their environment and it is also relevant to that subset of audience members whose cognitive environments contain the key (Flamson & Bryant, 2013).

Plainly, the relevance theory has accorded the encryption theory comprehensive and detailing notions about the mechanisms of humour as an encrypted phenomenon whose funniness is not determined by its superficial content, but the relationship between its external content and its implied meaning understood by both its speaker and its audience, and thereby typifying humour as an oblique, subjective, and social assorting communicative act. Nevertheless, this paper considers the input of relevance theory as limited, taking into consideration that it conceives humour as a sensation bound to the principle that human cognition is built toward the maximisation of relevance, and that the motivation of humour (either verbal or non-verbal) is based on a speaker's intention; that is, the understanding by the speaker of what will be effective in a particular cognitively-oriented context, and that the interpretation of humour is predicated on a speaker's utterance having the same meaning as was intended within a particular cognitively-oriented context. Consequently, as an enhancement to all this, this paper has characterised humour as a *pragmeme*. Here, this idea of *pragmeme* is contingent on the notion of a *pragmeme* as submitted by Mey (2001), as situationally bound speech. It also transects with Carpone's (2005) view of a *pragmeme* as a situated speech act, which synergises the rules of language and that of a society in determining meaning; a meaning intended as a socially recognised object, sensitive to social expectations about the situation in which it is to be interpreted. As a situated speech act, a *pragmeme* undergoes transformations having been acted upon by the forces of a regimented situation, (in the arguments of Mey, 2010:2883, "the place where the linguistic interactants meet, not as disembodied 'talking heads', but as agents on the societal scene, bringing along their entire baggage of world knowledge: tacit and explicit presuppositions, expectations, and prejudices, as well as prior linguistic experiences") that reshapes the original illocutionary value of a speech act by adding contextual layers of meaning, or even may change the illocutionary value of the speech act (Carpone, 2005).

Political humour, either verbal or non-verbal, is encrypted, but it is a *pragmeme*. When it is embedded, not only in a cognitively-oriented context, but in the entire situation which comprises the context of use, rules that transform what is being communicated into what it is meant in adherence to social constraints and lastly, the co-text, it fulfils social functions (Carpone, 2010) rather than just implicating speaker meaning. In other words, political humour is a product of mutual interactional situations, and it is understood based on the social context in which it is uttered or designed. Instead of ordinarily decoding what political humour may mean, and trying to decipher its verbal and nonverbal content, the situation in which the entire political cartoons actually fit is activated to give a comprehensive account of such political humour. Therefore, this paper hypothesises that political cartoonists make use of encrypted political humour to pass across socio-political functions, where they both share social-political affordances with their audience.

Materials and Methods

Materials

The materials used for this paper comprise six (6) political cartoons derived from Aprokotoons Media (2016).² This cartoon network was selected because it domiciles in Nigeria. In addition, it is well-informed of political events in the country, and is Nigeria's foremost cartoon journal with a large collection of relevant cartoon resources for print and electronic media. The attitude to events in Nigeria at the moment can be read outside the country differently, as well as the understanding of political practice, which recognition can be well-interpreted through the figurative series of political cartoons, which create conditions for pragmeme and provokes a wholesome interpretation to the encrypted humorous message.

Procedure

The political cartoons were non-randomly selected in view of their relevant political humorous pictorial renditions to exemplify certain political circumstances that echo the pragmatic humorous settings to clarify how this kind of humorous category is perceived and read by the target audience. They were selected for insightful exemplifications of Nigeria's 56th Independence Anniversary, the crusade against corruption of Muhammadu Buhari at the inception of his administration, and the alleged 2016 budget padding scandal that rocked the Nigerian House of Representatives. Accordingly, political humour (verbal and non-verbal) in these collections were critiqued with the theoretical apparatus of encryption and pragmeme. We have analyzed political cartoon as a genre because it uses symbolism as a convincing humorous technique, and it also includes a pragmeme to reflect a useful interpretation of a coded humorous message. We have deciphered the humorous intent conveyed by irony, labels, and symbols; the intent in political cartoons could be deciphered by readers or viewers due to general background knowledge. We have summarized and systematized the fact that symbolism, caricature, and labeling in the political cartoon are subject to the pragmeme of political humor, which reduces the anticorruption crusade to an inequitable political bias crusade.

Results and Discussion

A picture merits a thousand words, but in Nigeria it is important to consider the wedges of political situations in a country. This section of the paper examines some of these political circumstances as they are echoed with pragmemic political humorous embellishments in some selected cartoons to ascertain how such humour is instantiated to targeting audience perception.

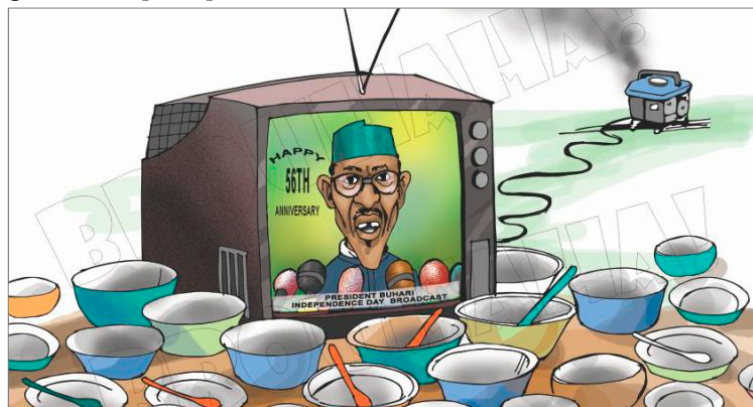


Figure 1. Cartoon 1a: 56th Independence Day broadcast.

October 1, every year, commemorates the freedom from British colonialism, which Nigeria attained in 1960. That year, the hovering British Union Jack was lowered, and the green-white-green flag was raised to recognise Nigeria's sovereignty. Thus, the date, October 1, has indelibly remained memorable in the annals of Nigeria, and

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every year on that date, there are reflections on issues that hinge on the economic, social, religious, and political growth of the country. This reflection-exercise essentially starts from the president, who gives an inventory of issues during the mandatory October 1 broadcast.

On the occasion of Nigeria's 56th Independence Anniversary celebration, the man at the helms of affairs, President Muhammadu Buhari (PMB), expressed himself in a nationwide broadcast, thus:

I know that uppermost in your minds today is the economic crisis. The recession for many individuals and families is real. For some, it means not being able to pay school fees, for others it's not being able to afford the high cost of food (rice and millet) or the high cost of local and international travel, and for many of our young people the recession means joblessness, sometimes after graduation from university or polytechnic. (*TELL*, October 1, 2016)²

Prior to this broadcast, Buhari had made convincing assurances of a better Nigeria through the *Change* mantra on which he had campaigned and solicited votes for his presidential bid the previous year. Hence, upon his assumption of office in May 29, 2015, there were high expectations as most Nigerians looked forward to the new government, which would wave a magic wand and make all challenges vanish. However, a year and several months into the Buhari administration, events did not actually unfold as anticipated even as the country celebrated her 56th Independence Anniversary. Thus, the cartoon, captioned in this paper as *56th Independence Day Broadcast* is a response to the state of Nigeria at 56.

The cartoon captures a despondent Nigeria at 56. The drawing presents an old-fashioned television powered by a mini-generating set, named *I pass my neighbour* in the Nigerian context. Shown on the television is a caricatured Muhammadu Buhari, giving a live broadcast on the 56th Independence Anniversary of Nigeria. What is significant in the cartoon is the cartoonist's striking use of symbols. A close examination of the cartoon reveals an ambience of poverty and stagnancy. The old-fashioned television is symbolic of Nigeria, a country stuck in the past; a crippled giant characterised by lack of an advanced, developed, or progressive economy. As economic experts have observed, Nigeria has been experiencing economic turbulence since late 2014, and in 2016, Nigeria's economic performance deteriorated as it entered a recession. This is a state engendered by a plunge in crude oil prices, a decline in oil production, and a reduction in non-oil exports, all of which contributed to the acute scarcity of foreign exchange (KPMG, 2017).³ A similar symbol, in the cartoon, that gives Nigeria away as a weak country is the empty plates with spoons, which help portray poverty in its highest degree. The unfilled plates show that despite PMB's promises, hunger is ravaging the country. Apart from the perennial food insecurity, brought about by the vagaries of climate change, wrong economic policies of agriculture, and insecurity in the North East among others, hikes in food prices due to the 2016 recession give credence to this unpalatable situation. This serves to reinforce the position of the United Nations, the African Development Bank, and British Prime Minister Theresa May that Nigeria is the global poverty capital. The destitution of Nigeria and her people is also conspicuous in the *I pass my neighbour* (mini-generator), which is symbolic of a country that is still incapable of providing electricity for productive use.

The political cartoon under analysis, at this point, has inherently made use of symbolism as its persuasive humorous technique, and the workings of pragmeme should be incorporated to give a wholesome interpretation to the encrypted humorous message. Thus, in doing this, it is ascertained at this point that beyond the fact that the symbols in the cartoon represent the ugly circumstances of the nation at 56, the notion of symbolism in the cartoon speaks volumes to a striking contrast between the odious state of the country and the commonly shared campaign promises of PMB in 2014/2015. According to President Muhammadu Buhari:

Our nation urgently needs fundamental political reform and improvement in governance, more transparency and accountable (sic). If you nominate me in December 2014, and elect me in February 2015, my administration will make our economy one of the fastest-growing emerging economies in the world with a real GDP growth averaging at least 10-12% annually.... Guarantee a minimum price for all cash crops and facilitate the storage of agricultural products to overcome seasonal shortages of selected food crops.... Generate,

² Buhari, M. (2016, October 1). 56th Independence Day anniversary broadcast. Tell. Retrieved from <http://www.tell.ng>

³ KPMG (2017). National budget 2017, KPMG International.

transmit, and distribute electricity on a 24/7 basis whilst simultaneously ensuring the development of sustainable/renewable energy by 2019. (*Vanguard*, May 28, 2015)⁴

In spite of this, it was in 2016 that Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product further contracted negatively in the fourth quarter. According to the country's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), "for the full year 2016, GDP contracted by 1.51 percent, indicating a real GDP of N67,984.20 billion (which is equivalent to approximately 188 million USD) for the year, the worst in more than 30 years" (*Sun*, March 1, 2017).⁵ This contraction spelt a difficult season for Nigerians, who were confronted with a high cost of food, inflation, shrunken foreign reserves, an insubstantial currency, fuel shortages, and a problematic electric power supply. In this regard, there is an indication that symbolism in the cartoon is a rallying point for the humour that is entrenched in the cartoon. It is quite humorously critical that President Buhari, despite his *change* rhetoric, could not make Nigerians feel any difference even a year and several months into his administration. At 56, the biting hardship in Nigeria was a far cry from the president's appealing campaign promises. Symbolism, in the cartoon, is subordinated to the pragmeme of political humour, which appeals to the audience as regard the incommensurability in Buhari's slowly ineffective campaign promises and the reality of Nigeria's despair at 56.

The next cartoon titled, *Happy 56th Birthday/Anniversary*, is in the same category with cartoon 1a above as it also targets the 2016 Independence Anniversary.

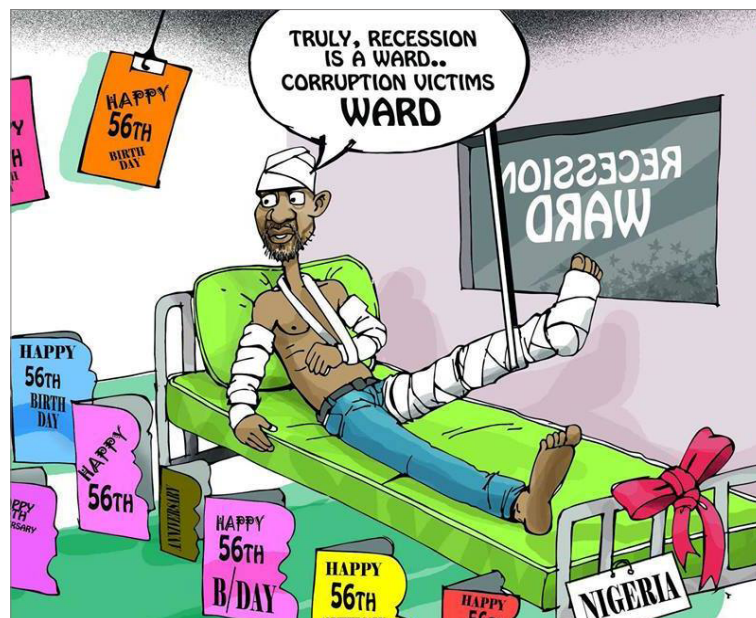


Figure 2. Cartoon 1b: Happy 56th birthday/anniversary.

Cartoon 1b, like 1a, encrypts the hopeless state of Nigeria at 56 with the aid of symbolism, irony, and labelling. Through the label, NIGERIA, at the nethermost part of the bunk, the entire hospital-ward pictorial representation symbolises Nigeria. It does not only indicate that recession is a prominent ward in Nigeria, it also suggests the ubiquity of recession in Nigeria in 2016. As signalled above, in 2016, Nigeria was being plagued by economic recession, which affected the lives and livelihood of her citizens, especially, the middle and lower classes across the country, and this in turn is translated into severe hunger, ill-health (which could not be reversed due to an outright lack of resources), and death. Typical of this poverty-stricken situation is the malnourished patient on bed, who is symbolic of ordinary Nigerians who were the ones that were actually battered by the biting recession. From the metaphorical label, TRULY, RECESSION IS A WARD... CORRUPTION VICTIMS WARD, recession is foregrounded to have been accommodated and it had also taken its toll on certain people in Nigeria; particularly people who directly suffered from the root cause of recession – corruption. This discourse is validated in the words of Magu, Chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission

⁴ Vanguard (2015, May 28). What Buhari promised Nigerians. Vanguard. Retrieved from <http://www.vanguardngr.com>

⁵ Obasi, B., & Taiwo-Obanloye, J. (2017, March 1). Nigeria GDP Growth rate contracts by 1.3% in Q4, 2016-MBS. Sunnews. Retrieved from <http://www.sunnewsonline.com>

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(EFCC), (quoted in *ThisDay*, 2017), who submitted that “corruption is virtually the sole reason for the country’s current economic slump.... I maintain that economic recession is caused by corruption. About 90 per cent of the cause of recession is corruption...”⁶ Magu is of the view that unscrupulous people stole state funds, which have been kept where they cannot be reached. The focal point is that it is the people, especially, public officials,⁷ who have access to public funds that divert it, and once this is successfully carried out, it affects the populace who should have benefitted. Oby Ezekwesili (cited in *Africanews*, 22 November, 2018) thus sums up this scenario when she states that “corruption is a tax on the poor”.⁸ What is more to the situation being described by the cartoon is the use of irony. The beautiful and colourful card labels – Happy 56th Birthday/Happy 56th Anniversary and the red symbolic ribbon are ironical. They emphasise years of cheeriness, happiness, health, and prosperity, which should have been the state of Nigeria considering the years of independence amidst the atmosphere of gloom, depression, and economic despondency.

With the aid of irony, labels, and symbols, this cartoon is advertently encrypted with humorous intent, of which it could be avowed that readers or viewers would be able to decrypt by virtue of shared background knowledge. This is the humour that is affirmed to have evolved as a means of honestly signalling compatibility within local groups (in this case, the cartoonists and mostly Nigerian readers) by relying on the detection of encrypted information, their cognition of which is then signalled via honest laughter (Flamson & Bryant, 2013). However, in addition to the honest laughter, there is the certainty that the readership barely understood the hidden message, hence the need to resort to the framework of pragmeme.

The Independence Day of a country, like a birthday, is a revered day that brings about celebration. Such a day, among other features, expresses victorious emancipation from oppression and all forms of subjugation. Nigeria celebrated her 56th independence anniversary in 2016, but not without internal teething challenges such as economic recessions. In view of this situation, the symbolism, labels, and irony deployed in the present cartoon are used to assemble the force of the humour entrenched in it. The extremely sick fellow in the cartoon, who is symbolic of Nigeria, Nigerians, and their aggravated state of poverty during the recession, wittily encapsulates a narrow-minded heraldry of the Nigerian government on economic matters. Successive governments relied on oil because it accounted for more than 90 percent of foreign income, and failed to truly diversify the Nigerian economy due to their selfish interests. Therefore, in 2015 when oil prices fell significantly, the Nigerian naira suffered serious devaluation. Worse still, President Buhari could not prevent the recession that ensued after the collapse in oil prices due to poor economic transformation strategies. Next to the symbolism is the irony of the colourful greeting cards and red ribbon. These do not express any form of worthy celebration at 56; instead, they humorously depict the celebration of poverty, hopelessness, confusion, and lethargy engendered by the economic recession. At 56, Nigeria celebrated non-payment of monthly salaries, industrial actions, and worsening health care facilities. The labels, in particular, **TRULY, RECESSION IS A WARD... CORRUPTION VICTIMS WARD**, are a form of lampoon on Nigeria leaders, whose selfish interests and actions have incapacitated the Nigerian economy and ordinary citizens. Thus, it could be established that the symbolism, irony, and labels in the cartoon are subordinated to the pragmeme of humour, which impels rudderless, corrupt, and self-centred leadership that is unveiled in the perception of Nigerians. The next cartoon captures the anti-corruption crusade.

⁶ Obia, V. (2017, February 12). Magu: 90% of the cause of our recession is corruption. *ThisDay*. Retrieved from <http://www.thisdaylive.com>

⁷ For instance, in 2016, Diezani Alison Madueke, a former Minister of Petroleum in Nigeria, was alleged to have looted \$20b (see *Pulse.ng*, December 12, 2016).

⁸ Alfa Shaban, A. (2018, November 22). Nigerian suffering bad governance, corruption – Oby Ezekwesili. *Africanews*. Retrieved from <http://www.africanews.com>



Figure 3. Cartoon 2a: The broom and its selective political victims.

A major victory convener that allowed Buhari to hit a home run in the 2015 presidential election was his anti-corruption profile, which stems from his past records as a former military ruler, and the series of campaign promises he made before the election. One of these promises was the pledge to combat corruption, which has been institutionalised in the Nigerian system. In his words:

If you nominate me in December 2014 and elect me in February 2015, my administration will prevent the abuse and misuse of Executive, Legislative and public offices, through greater accountability, transparency, strict, and implementable anti-corruption laws, through strengthening and sanitising the EFCC and ICPC as independent entities... (*Vanguard*, May 28, 2015)

Upon his election, and swearing-in as President of Nigeria on May 29, 2015, Buhari did not only prevent the abuse of public offices by changing the leaderships of key anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria, he also commenced waging war on corrupt politicians and government officials who mostly functioned in the previous administration.⁹

As impressive as Buhari's anti-graft campaign was, it has been flawed by the perception that it was selective, insincere, and vindictive. Precisely, opinions and political interpretations have it that the war against corruption by the administration of Buhari was meant as a witch-hunt on members of the opposition party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP). It is, therefore, these mixed reactions toward the anti-corruption crusade that inform cartoon 2a titled *The broom and its selective political victims*.

Cartoon 2a encrypts PMB's activities within the anti-corruption crusade with the aid of symbolism, caricature, and labelling, and by virtue of mutual knowledge, partial decryption of the message of the cartoon is likely. However, to fully engage in the comprehension of the implication of the cartoon, insight from pragmeme is crucial. From the cartoon, the two twin apartments symbolise the two sovereign political parties in Nigeria: the opposition party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and the ruling party, the All Progressive Congress (APC). What foregrounds this symbol further are the umbrella, in green-white-red colours, hung on the top of the first apartment; which is symbolic of the PDP, and the broom, suspended on the top of the second apartment signifying the APC. Conspicuously next to this is the caricature of President Buhari through the exaggeration of his distinctive facial features. The costumes: starting from the bandana, the single-barrelled gun, the revolver, hanging in his side and the seemingly uniform cum native clothing symbolise battle, and at the same time, portray the president as a man entirely engaged in warfare. To cap it all, the flame emission from the single-

⁹ The previous administration in this context portends Goodluck Jonathan's corrupt administration which Buhari's anti-corruption crusade unearthed, among several other corrupt cases, how the security funds that were approved for the purchase of arms through the office of the former National Security Adviser Colonel Sambo Dasuki (Rtd) were diverted into private pockets.

barrelled gun lying on his shoulder is symbolic of an ongoing war against some set of people. And who is this set of people? They are those in the first apartment – the PDP members. The shattered door signifies that the dwellers are not at peace. This is also evident in the lifeless body being dragged away by President Buhari.

This notion of selective anticorruption battle is validated in the words of Onueze Okocha, a top lawyer and Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN). According to him:

It is very obvious. So far, those that have been accused, arrested, and arraigned for corruption-related offences are members of the PDP. We have not lost sight of the fact that many of the party's members defected to the APC. The former PDP members have been accused of wrongdoing, but they are untouched. I think the war is lopsided and not waged with an altruistic motive (*The Nation*, July 14, 2016).¹⁰

However, this submission was invalidated by Femi Adesina, Special Assistant to the President on Media and Publicity, when he states:

Why won't the president be selective, do you expect to just enter the street and begin to arrest everybody because he's fighting corruption? Of course no, you must have to select only those who are corrupt and as a matter of fact, not every Nigerian is corrupt (*Daily post*, August 20, 2018).¹¹

Indeed, not every Nigerian is corrupt but Buhari, through the anti-corruption agencies, had to select only those who were corrupt. The fact that the second apartment, which housed APC members, remained un-attacked by the rampaging Buhari indicates that they are not culpable of corrupt offences. Nevertheless, the labelling: ...AND WHEN HE SAW THE BROOM, HE PASSED OVER US reinforces and contextualises the cartoon's non-verbal features. The labelling, apart from being an allusion to a verse in the Holy Bible, Exodus 12:13, "...and when I see the blood, I will pass over you...", has been distorted to accommodate the phenomenon of Buhari's selective anti-corruption judgement. Thus, it reinforces and contextualises the fact that members of the APC in the undamaged apartment are undeniably corrupt, but they have been redeemed from the wrath of the law and the anti-corruption weaponry of the president by virtue of being APC members. The broom, like the biblical blood, sets them free legally¹² from sentence and condemnation, which would have come upon them as a result of their corrupt profiles.

Cartoon 2a is indeed worthy with honest laughter because the cartoonist and his audience share the same political background and knowledge. However, there is more to the cartoon than mere common amusement. Further interpretation of the cartoon is aided through insights from the workings of pragmeme. Pragmeme, in this case, stretches the end products of the symbolism, caricatures, and labelling used in cartoon 2a beyond the various readings given to them in the preceding paragraphs. As a matter of fact, the symbols, caricatures, and labelling that are deployed in the cartoon are forces for the message of humour in the cartoon. There are glaring absurdities in Buhari's anti-graft war since the war has several times been derided as being selective and not addressing the whole gamut of corruption blindly. The symbols, the caricature (showcasing Buhari in the duty-post of selectively fighting corruption) and the labelling (revealing that APC members are free from being investigated) scorn the anti-corruption crusade and foreground the imbalance in the crusade. This asymmetrical face-off against corrupt Nigerians could be succinctly observed in the looters' list published from the Federal Ministry of Information in 2018, which contains the names of PDP officials alleged to have embezzled funds meant for the office of the former National Security Adviser to the President Goodluck Jonathan, Sambo Dasuki. According to a US-based political commentator, Badru Remi, "the fact that the APC government ... presented a list that reflected the opposition alone is a confirmation that the fight against corruption under President Buhari is merely political and must be dismissed with a wave of the hand" (*Punchng.com*, April 7, 2018).¹³ Thus, the symbolism, caricatures, and labelling in the cartoon are subordinated to the pragmeme of political humour,

¹⁰ Mordi, R. (2016, July 14). Is Buhari's anticorruption war selective? *The Nation*. Retrieved from <http://www.thenationonline.net>

¹¹ Ameh, G. (2018, August 20). Why Buhari is selective in his anticorruption- presidency. *Daily Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailypost.ng>

¹² Examples of politicians who were freed from guilty verdicts were Rotimi Amaechi, a former member of the PDP, and Umar Ganduje. Rotimi Amaechi was alleged to have spent \$140 million on Buhari's campaign, and stolen €500 million (*TheTrent*, 2016) while Umar Ganduje, the governor of Kano State, was alleged to have been seen in a scandalous video collecting huge amount of American dollars taken to bribe public works contractors.

¹³ Punch (2018, April 7). Anticorruption: A tale of two looter's lists. *Punch*. Retrieved from <http://www.punchng.com>

which relegates the anticorruption crusade to an insincere and unfair political prejudicial crusade.

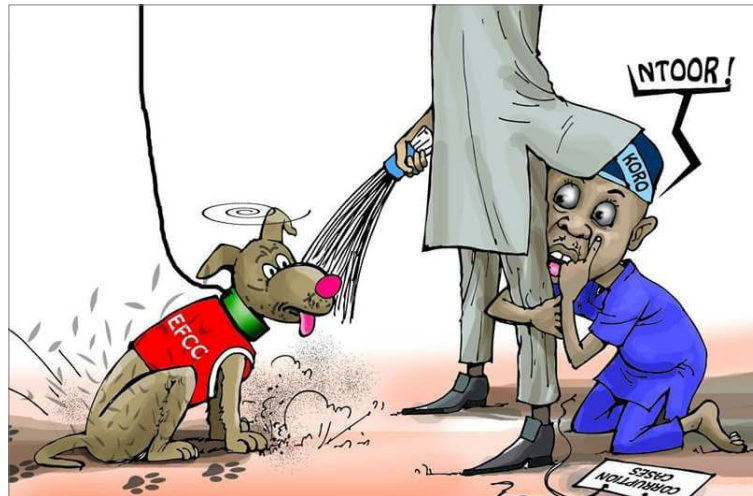


Figure 4. Cartoon 2b: Lame EFCC dog.

Cartoon 2b is in the same category as cartoon 2a. Its thematic direction is also corruption and the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari. This cartoon is also encrypted, essentially, with symbolism and labelling, and because the audience and the cartoonist are grounded in the same socio-political orientation, the cartoon provokes honest laughter. The dog, labelled EFCC, symbolises the foremost anti-corruption agency in Nigeria, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. The posture of the dog and the fact that its tongue hangs out of its mouth is symbolic of a dog that wants to attack its victim, but changes to a friendly mood towards its victim because its owner is present. This implies that the EFCC assumes an affable disposition toward a political situation that should be unequivocally inimical for the reason that it has been deinstitutionalised. This political situation occurs because the broom symbolises the ruling party that empowers the dog/EFCC; the headless entity holding it is President Buhari, and the entity, kneeling down and wrapping his hand around Buhari's leg while deriding the anti-corruption agency, is the former Minister for Defence in Goodluck Jonathan's administration, Senator Musiliu Obanikoro (politically nicknamed, Koro). The labelling: NTOOR (which means: to scorn) uttered by Koro, with his left index finger close to his eyes, KORO on his cap, and CORRUPTION CASES lying on the floor, underpin and situate the cartoon's symbolic features.

Senator Musiliu Obanikoro is an ex-PDP official, who is now in the APC. He had joined the ruling party, allegedly in order to evade a corruption case levelled against him by the EFCC. Joining the ruling party to escape the hammer of the law was a trend when the APC became the ruling party. This position is evinced in Onyema *et al* (2018). According to their submission:

Anecdotal evidence suggests an emerging trend of high-ranking and strategically important politicians joining the ruling party, in order to assure some reduction in the rigour of criminal investigation. For example, there have been limited reports with respect to the investigation of Mr Musiliu Obanikoro (former minister under the People's Democratic Party (PDP)), Mr Godswill Akpabio (former Governor of Akwa Ibom) and Mr Martins Elechi (former Governor of Ebonyi State) (2018:8).

Senator Obanikoro was apprehended by the EFCC in 2016 for his alleged role in the diversion of ₦4.7bn from the account of the office of the National Security Adviser in 2014. Although it was said that he returned some of the funds, on November 25, 2017, he decamped to the APC. Having defected, his CORRUPTION CASES were dropped, and he could scorn the EFCC, NTOOR! Obanikoro's sins were forgiven, just as the party's national chairman, Adams Oshiomhole declared – "We have quite a number of other leaders, who have come...in fact, once you have joined the APC, all your sins are forgiven" (*Saharareporters*, January 18, 2019).¹⁴

By situating the features (symbols and labelling), and the cartoon *Lame EFCC Dog* within the idea of pragmemes, it could be stated that, beyond the honest laughter that these features evoke, the use of these specific symbols

¹⁴ Saharareporters (2019, January 18). Join APC and all your sins will be forgiven, Oshiomole declares. Saharareporters. Retrieved from <http://www.saharareporters.com>

PRAGMEME OF POLITICAL HUMOUR IN SELECTED NIGERIAN POLITICAL CARTOONS

and labelling are effective in derisively revealing conduct that does not conform to the essential tenets of an incorruptible anti-corruption scheme that works by unswerving and uncompromising adherence to ethical principles and values. Senator Musiliu Obanikoro is alleged to have pilfered national security funds but because he retreated to the ruling party, the allegations of financial profligacy levelled against him were literally swept under the carpet. Furthermore, the dog, which is symbolic of the EFCC in the cartoon, shows a slavish institution, and is denied the capacity to act on its own. It can only perform its duties with complete servitude to President Buhari. Thus, what the cartoon offers is an underlying pragmeme of humour effectively punctuating the whole anti-corruption system as deficient in integrity even though the scheme seems to be held in high-esteem by the general public.

The next set of cartoons to be examined revolve around the 2016 Appropriation Bill that was allegedly padded.



Figure 5. Cartoon 3a: Padding and insertions.

In the Nigerian context and in several other climes, the executive branch, headed by the president, is duly reserved the prerogative to prepare the country's appropriation bill for a particular fiscal year. Having planned it, the president presents the bill to the national parliament for onward approval, and after such endorsement it becomes the budget to be implemented. This is such a smooth sailing process for any country's budget that employs this procedure. Unfortunately, the Nigerian 2016 Appropriation Bill did not take this course. It was flawed and enmeshed in controversy. It is the most contentious bill considering the history of budgeting in Nigeria. Its polemical nature stems from the news that it was missing after presentation and the fact that its financial statements were allegedly bloated beyond proportion. Nevertheless, the latter characteristic outstretched public opinions. One of these views is lodged in cartoons 3a and 3b. The two cartoons are responses to the alleged padding of the 2016 Budget by some legislative officials of the National Assembly to the tune of ₦481 billion (which is equivalent to approximately 1.33 billion USD) (*Vanguard*, July 27, 2016).¹⁵

Cartoon 3a titled, *Padding and Insertions* is encrypted with symbolism, labelling, and caricature. Meanwhile, as a result of audiences' mutual knowledge regarding this issue in 2016, limited decryption manifested in the form of honest laughter, especially from the distorted faces of the symbolic legislators in the cartoon, is probable. However, to fully grasp the full message of the cartoon, insights from pragmeme are of great importance. In cartoon 3a, the four centipede-like beings labelled DOGARA and the full-bodied human being labelled JIBRIN are symbolic of notable officials of the Nigerian House of Representatives. The can, labelled HOUSE OF REPS, symbolises the House of Representative Chamber from which the legislators operate, and most importantly, it is symbolic of an ascertained allegation against the four officials contained there-in. These officials are the Speaker of the House of Representative himself, Yakubu Dogara, the Deputy Speaker, Yussuff Lasun, the Chief Whip, Alhassan Ado-Doguwu, and Minority Leader, Leo Ogor, and lastly, the official outside the can is the Chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations, Abdulmumuni Jibrin. Hon. Jibrin was the legislator who raised the alarm and revealed that the 2016 budget had been padded and inserted with fake line items. Jibrin had alleged "the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Yakubu Dogara, and three other principal officers of the House of padding the 2016 budget to the tune of over N400bn" (equivalent to approximately 1.1 billion USD) (*Punch*, December 30, 2017).¹⁶ He was reported to have stood by his allegations against the principal officers of the House of Representatives, namely, Dogara, Lasun, Ado-Dogunwa, and Ogor

¹⁵ Daniel, S. (2016, July 27). Revealed: NASS padded 2016 budget with N481bn. *Vanguard*. Retrieved from <http://www.vanguardngr.com>
¹⁶ Alagbe, J. (2017, December 30). 2018 Budget: worries over another era of padding. *Punch*. Retrieved from <http://www.punchng.com>

(*Punch*, August 19, 2016),¹⁷ and this led to his suspension from the house. What he holds like a shield in the cartoon is a summary of the allegations: PADDING AND INSERTIONS. As revealed in *Vanguard* newspaper:

...the lawmakers ingeniously removed some key projects proposed by the executive or drastically reduced their costs and introduced many others not contemplated by the Presidency, which prepared the budget. Among the projects whose votes were surreptitiously jerked up without the knowledge of the executive, were Nigerian railway modernization project: Lagos – Kano standard gauge rail line project, whose cost was raised by N32.5 billion and the consultancy dredging and river training works (609 million) under the Ministry of Transportation. Others, according to the document, are the Code of Conduct Bureau, which received an additional N4.4billion, and a provision for broadband internet service to National Assembly Nigcomsat, N318 million, training and consultancy for Nigcomsat 2 Projects, N3.5 billion, etc. in the Ministry of Communications. Most scandalous, according to the document, is the case of Ministry of Works, Power and Housing where 82 new projects, principally roads, with a total provision of about N50.63 billion, were inserted in the budget. (July 27, 2016)

These series of allegations of PADDING and INSERTIONS revealed by Jibrin were not in tune with some officials of the House of Representatives. Thus, Jibrin was sanctioned. Hence, the caricature of these officials as centipede-like beings validates the sanctions and their predatory nature given the allegations levelled against them. This destructive character demonstrated in the cartoon toward their accuser, Honourable Abdul Jibrin, is displayed in his removal as Chairman of the Committee on Appropriations by the leadership of the House of Representative following the alarming revelations he made regarding the 2016 budget.

Therefore, the prominent features in this cartoon, namely, symbolism – which stands for some of our soi-disant honourable members in the House of Representatives, labelling – which helps to situate the symbols and other non-verbal variables, and caricature – used to ridicule the Parliamentarians especially, the Honourable Speaker of the house who claimed: “I studied Law and I have been in the legislature and all this period; I have never heard of the word ‘padding’ being an offence under any law” (*Saharareporters*, August 6, 2016).¹⁸ The horrific-hilarious faces of the honourable members, which raise a poignant rhetorical question (such as why did you reveal our secrets?), are all subordinated to the pragmeme of humour. This shows the dishonour in the alleged honourable members of the House of Representatives. It reveals their condemnable value and legislative misconduct, and exposes the fact that though their portfolios bear legislature, they are lawbreakers being burlesqued for making a mockery of the House of Representatives, Nigeria’s second bicameral legislature, the National Assembly. This same pragmeme is also fully represented in the last cartoon (3b) examined in this paper titled, *Padded-Paddy-Paddy Lawmakers*.

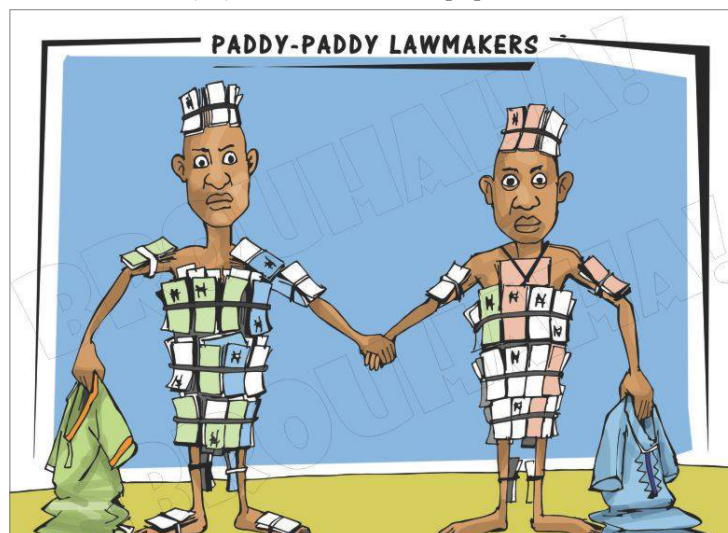


Figure 6. Cartoon 3b: Padded-paddy-paddy lawmakers.

No doubt, cartoon 3b has been encrypted with symbolism, caricature, and labelling, thereby engendering some

¹⁷ Ameh, J. (2016, August 19). Budget padding: 10 principal officers disown Jibrin. *Punch*. Retrieved from <http://www.punchng.com>

¹⁸ Saharareporters (2016, August 6). Dogara under fire for saying budget padding is not corruption. *Saharareporters*. Retrieved from <http://www.saharareporters.com>

honest laughter among audiences who are abreast of the case of disproportionately large funds inserted into the 2016 budget. However, on the other side of the honest laughter, there is the pragmeme of humour. Taking a look at cartoon 3b, unequivocally, those who have been symbolically exemplified in the cartoon are Honourable Abdul Jibrin, to the left and Honourable Speaker, Yakubu Dogara, to the right. The naira padded to their bodies is symbolic of the padded funds that were inserted and made the budget proposal more outrageous than the projects contained in it demanded. The glaring fact that Jibrin holds tightly to the hand of Dogara signifies and points to the culpability of Yakubu Dogara in the alleged budget padding scandal.

The leadership of the House of Representatives relieved Jibrin of his office as Chairman of the Committee on Appropriations, based on the allegations that he alone fixed the budget. As relayed by *Vanguard* (July 27, 2016), "...the House of Representatives...alleged that Jibrin, singlehandedly changed the budget estimates presented by President Muhammadu Buhari to the National Assembly by adding N250 billion into it." However, Jibrin responded that rather than tell the truth, the leadership created the impression that he was sacked because he padded the 2016 budget (*Punch*, July 22, 2016).¹⁹ These fragments of events thus justify the grabbing of Yakubu Dogara's hand by Abdul Jibrin, directing attention to deals jointly perpetrated. This nonverbal gesture is substantiated in the bold labelling: PADDY-PADDY LAWMAKERS. The semantics of PADDY in the Nigerian context point to a friendship formed to conceal crime. Thus, the labelling describes Dogara and Jibrin as lawmakers who are cronies in the enterprise of padding for pecuniary gains. This suggests that none of the lawmakers may be exculpated from the stuffing of the 2016 budget beyond the required funds. To, therefore, understand this cartoon to its fullest extent, perceptions from pragmeme are significant. Without casting doubt, the cartoon's essential features are subordinated to the pragmeme of humour of the legislative arm of the government that should, in actual fact, be in the business of making laws that will have a lasting impact on Nigerians and advance the progress of Nigeria, but whose leadership is snowed under by what profits them and not what benefits Nigerians. It also exposes members of the House who are only there for their own selfish ends, as portrayed by the symbolic naira notes padded to their bodies, and not being used in the interest of Nigerians.

Conclusion

Several scholarly works (Abioye, 2009, Adegaju & Oyeboade, 2015, Taiwo, 2007, to name a few) have investigated humour in Nigerian political discourse, but very little attention has been directed towards some recent notable political events in the year 2016. This paper has examined the pragmeme of humour in the events of *Nigeria's 56th Independence Anniversary*, the *crusade against corruption*, and the alleged *2016 budget padding scandal* in selected cartoons. In interpreting the selected political cartoons, this paper engages the theoretical technicalities of the encryption theory of humour and pragmeme theory. With the former theory, it is ascertained that audiences who are well informed on these political happenings are able to decrypt the cartoons because they share the same political knowledge with the cartoonist, thus honest laughter is produced; and with the latter theory, the paper unveils actual embedded pragmatic forces (of idle campaign promises and Nigeria's hopeless reality at 56, self-centred leadership, and that the worst form of corruption is selective justice) in the cartoons. Hence, these findings are intended to enhance the public perception of our political actors and highlight the need for rethinking the sensibility in political acts, promises, and decisions.

Given that the year 2016 was filled with striking political events in Nigeria, future research could further engage in and examine the linguistic (and non-linguistic) implications of political incidents that are yet to be studied. This could be in debates, parliamentary proceedings, interviews, or those in forms of jokes, cartoons, or satirical drawings, to name but a few.

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¹⁹ Ameh, J. (2016, July 22). Dogara demanded N40bn padding in budget, says Jibrin. *Punch*. Retrieved from <http://www.punchng.com>

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