



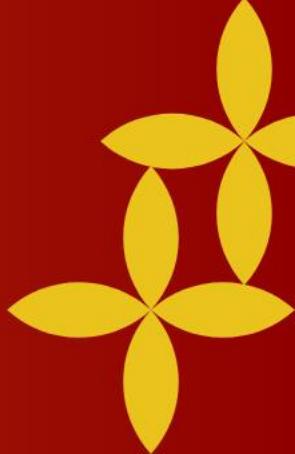
Delineating laughter in African Spaces

by Dr. Oni



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Abstract

In Human history, people laugh to express emotion, feelings, and character in different ways, different manners and at different times. Laughter generally, mirrors essential human activities and it represents a sign of humanity. Besides the amusement, mirth, pleasure and happiness there are often instances of mis-laughter that lead to tension, aggression and even humiliation. Laughter is an individual and a social form of expression. It is paradoxical and multiform in nature. Against this background, this study takes a critical look at laughter through a modified transformative theory and a cultural hermeneutics method. It examines the sociocultural impact of laughter in African societies, the gender dimension and the political application to laughter. It argues that beyond the ludic, laughter presents some transformational features applicable to the individual, the group and the society.

Key Words: laughter, ludic, mis-laughter, multiform, society.



Introduction Why laughter?

What is the relevance of thinking laughter in a Continent (Africa) at a cross road?

How does laughter fit into the process of knowledge production in African Studies?

How does a study of laughter fuse and integrate the overarching agenda of reconfiguring African Studies?

Is the presenter really serious?

Introduction

“Question of the milieu” in *Philosophy in an African Place* (B.Janz 2009, 16)

Milieu (French) connotes location, place, environment, *topos* the Greek notion of location, in-between (l’entre-deux) and centre.

“Question of the milieu” is one of the subtitle of Chapter One: “Introduction :Philosophy-in-Place”

“The milieu (milieux plural) is not only about geographical location, then, but also what happens and how we decide on what is worthy of attention” p.17



Introduction(Continued)

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- Examples in Philosophy -Auguste Comte *Cours de Philosophie Positive* 1836 . 40th lesson concept of **milieu** serves to understand vital phenomena. William James (Pragmatism) *The Principles of Psychology* 1890 . Milieu serves to understand mental states of persons.
- **Milieu** can also mean a social and physical environment where someone lives and where things happen (centre).
- A **milieu** can be a surrounding culture, family, neighbourhood or people. In this case, it means a group of people engaged in certain activities.
- A people one identifies with .
- But B. Janz was quick to add : “The idea of milieu stands in contrast to the idea of centre. A centre is static and centripetal. A milieu is fluid and centrifugal, that is, its coherence comes not from identifying and preserving itself, but from reenacting itself in new forms.”
- Interestingly, our centrifugal centre and location , our **milieu that** is worthy of attention is a politically tensed society, with enormous socio economic challenges. In the Sciences, Centripetal force acts towards the center (centre oriented) whereas centrifugal force acts outwards by creating multiple centres. .
- Moving away from usual rhetoric and narratives on Africa which in my understanding is centripetal, there is need for a centrifugal drive outwards with new insight. New insight to understand human interaction in location and milieu among which is laughter.

Meanings of Laughter

In order to avoid theoretical confusion and misunderstanding, there is need to clarify some terminologies. Humor, comic, laughter.

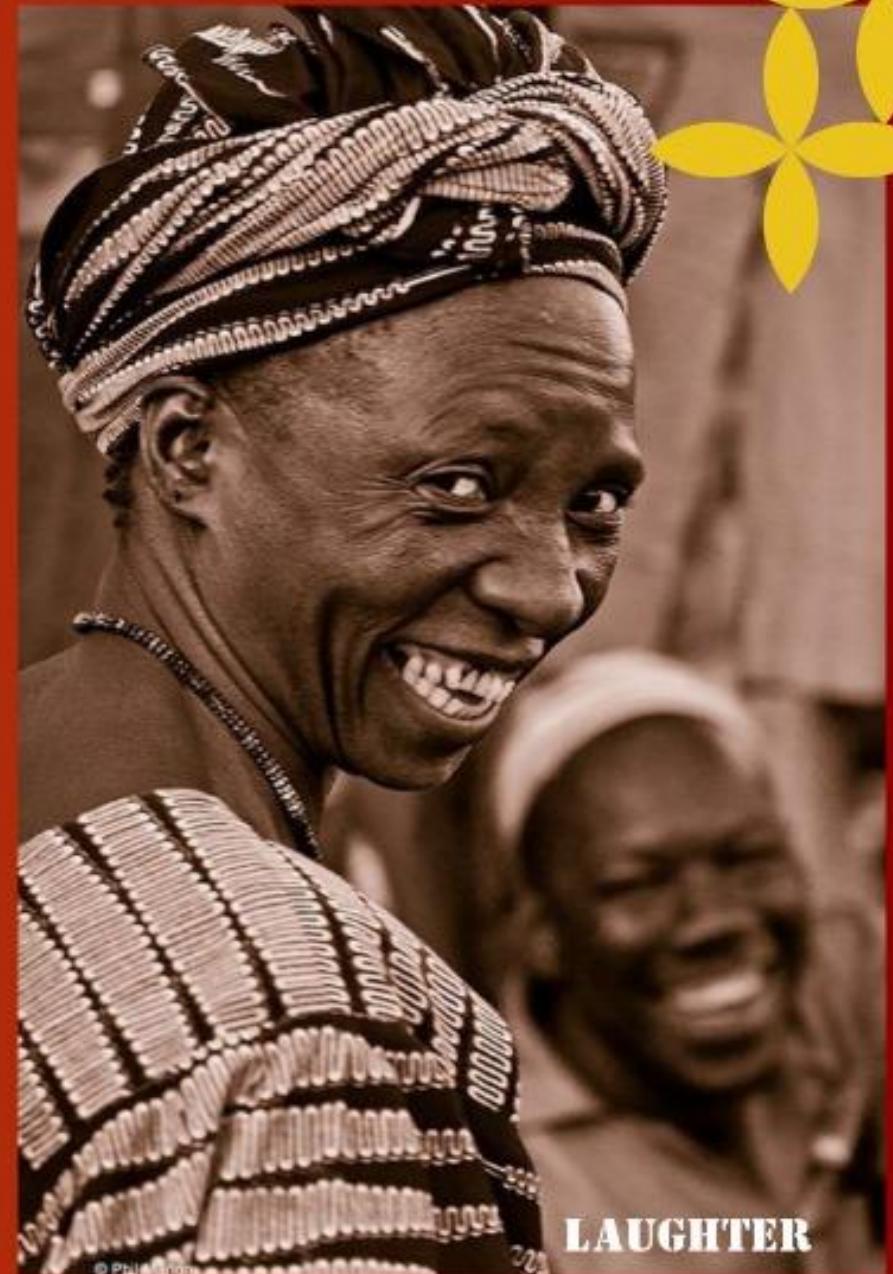
Humour is · amusement · badinage · buffoonery · clowning · comicality · drollery · facetiousness · flippancy · gaiety · happiness · jest · jesting

Comic: causing or meant to cause laughter

Laughter: What is laughter? Who laughs? How do we laugh? Why do we laugh? On whom or on what do we laugh? Where and when do we laugh?

In some dictionaries, laughter is defined as:

1. Vocal and facial expressions that show feelings of pleasure and funniness (Kojien Japanese Dictionary)



Meanings of Laughter (cont'd)

- 2) laughter expresses jovial feeling by a movement of the lips and mouth accompanied by rapidly shelled sounds(Petit Larousse)
- 3)Laughter expresses amusement, mirth, pleasure, happiness and sometimes disrespect or nervousness with a sound or sounds ranging from a loud burst to a series of quiet chuckles(Webster's Dictionary of American English)
- 4) Spontaneous sounds and movements of the face and body that are instinctive expressions of lively amusement and sometimes also of derision (See also Takuo Iwata, 2016, 133)





Functions of Laughter

- Laughter is a sign of humanity. See. Aristotle. Only Human beings laugh
- Laughter helps to decrease stress and anxiety by reducing stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. A recent study indicates that laughter helps to release endorphins.
- A deep belly laugh helps reduce muscle tension and can be a huge benefit of mental health
- laughter helps to connect with people
- It heightens the mood and improves quality of life.
- Laughter helps people to stay positive.
- laughter creates channels of communication
- Laughter unites and divides
- Laughter reconciles





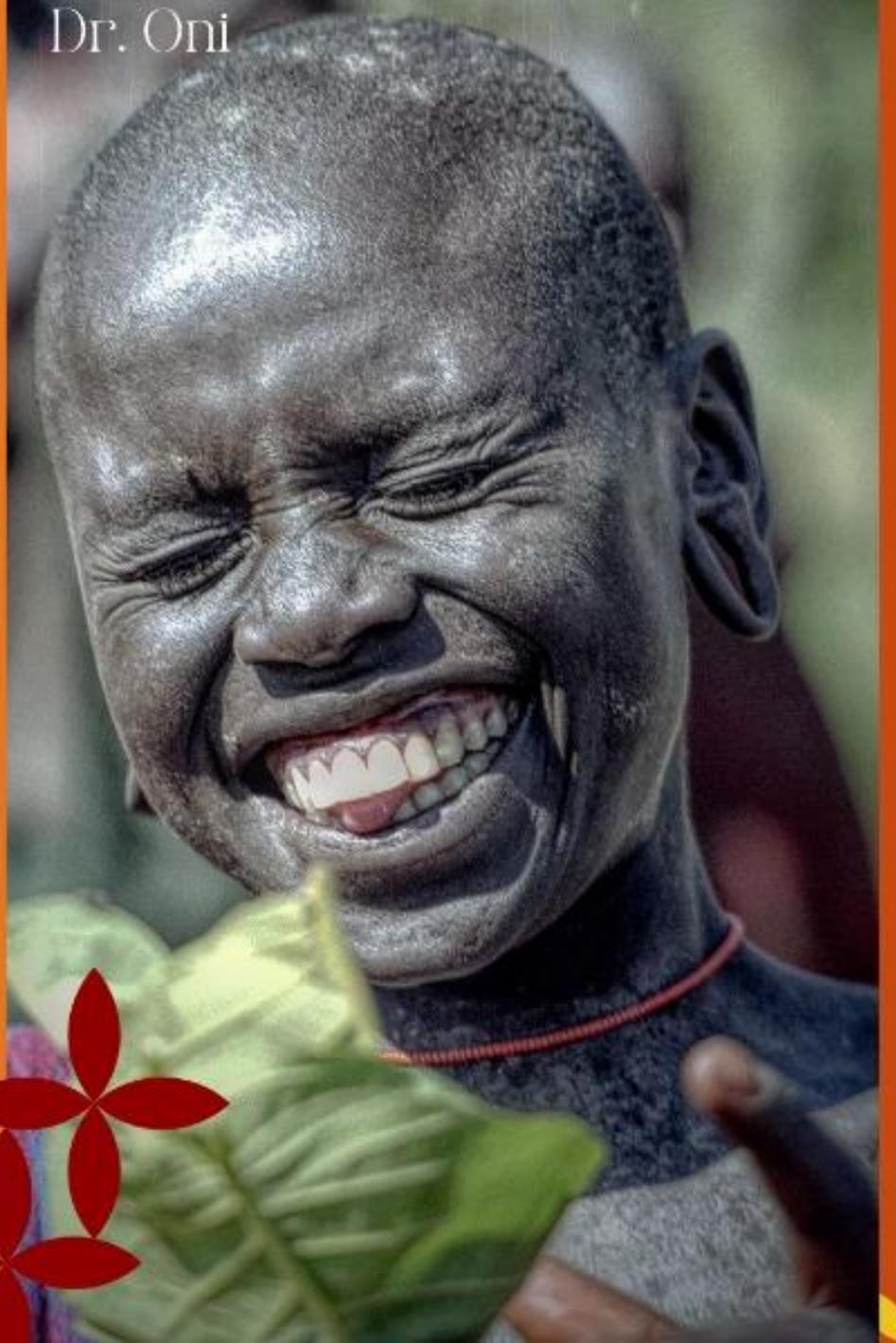
Multiforms of laughter

Laughter can be classified in different forms depending on the acoustic tone and the gesture of the agent /actor performing the act of laughing.

Basically, there are three major types of laughter

1) Spontaneous Laughter: Innocent expression of excitement and pleasure without being targeted at anyone. It is provoked by external stimuli or by emotions. Examples of spontaneous laughter, victory laughter, playful laughter comic expressions or jokes (L. Okoro, 2022) 2) Derisive laughter. It is meant to mock someone, another person and putting them to shame. Examples. Laughing at other people's shortcomings or mistakes. There is also the *Schadenfreude* jokes. From the German term Schadenfreude which means "harmful joy" , "these jokes produce humour out of people's misfortunes and tragedies (L.Okoro, 2022,) 3) Volitional Laughter. It is comes from other people's laughter. When people laugh spontaneously and get an equal response in laughter. (L.Okoro, 2022)

There is in French "the yellow laughter" or Rire Jaune . It is used to cover fear and disappointment . (George Steiner *The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan*, 2011, 18)



Methodology

The methodology of this study is cultural hermeneutics . Cultural Hermeneutics offers a synoptic representation of culture that details how the self is embedded in culture, highlights culture's inherently moral dispositions , and provides conceptual tools for approaching people's culture in specific encounters. Cultural hermeneutics is a science of meanings in cultures, an interpretation of peoples' culture based on their specific features. In this context, we shall interpret laughter, the African way. We shall attempt an understanding of laughter in an African context .



Theoretical Framework

The theory underpinning this study is the transformative learning theory. A theory developed by Jack Mezirow(1978). Mezirow understood that in human societies there is an instinctive drive to derive meanings from all actions and daily activities. The American Sociologist opines that since there is no enduring truth and that change is continuous, it is imperative that human beings develop a more critical and comprehensive worldview that establish a constructive interpretation and meaning and experiences in the world. Mezirow theorized that individual beings can adjust their thinking and apply their old understanding to new situations. Two basic focuses characterize his theory: the instrumental learning and the communicative learning. The instrumental is task oriented and problem solving, while the communicative is focuses on how people communicate their feelings, needs and desires in the process of relationship. He found that critical reflection and critical review lead to a transformation of human understanding of themselves and the world. From past experiences and encounter with other cultures and civilizations(se F. Fanon) a critical understanding of laughter opens new perspectives and new insights in the process of transforming the self and the people

Objective

The objective of this study is to develop a new perspective on African laughter that restores self-esteem and dignity.

The African Laughter

Sekai Nzenza is a Zimbabwean writer, politician and cultural critic

Her first book is *Zimbabwean Woman, My Own Story* (1988)

Darby Phillip (2017) *Postcolonizing the International (Working to change the Way we are)*

Chapter Two: “African Laughter” by Sekai Nzenza

“I was brought up to laugh with my belly. This was the African way of laughing” p.40

From “Crazy laughter to crazy laughter : Historical-Anthropological analysis of a ‘laughter epidemic’ in Tanzania” by Ines Pasqueron of Fommervault African Politics 2017 No 145 pp 129-151

“The aim of this study is to show that laughter can be taken seriously as a ‘total social fact’ “



Laughter is contagious when shared but needs no cure.



The African Laughter (Cont'd)

Laughter is a universal phenomenon specifically human. However, its manifestation, expression meaning are given different interpretations based on cultural and traditional values and social contexts.

In African cultures, laughter often serves multifaceted roles beyond just expressing amusement. Laughter can be a form of communication, social interrelatedness and bonding, evasion and denial strategy, deceptive mechanisms, or even a tool for sailing through complex social dynamics. An understanding of African laughter would entail delving into various dimensions among which.

Cultural Significance: In most African Societies, laughter is perceived and valued as a cultural phenomenon that transcends time.

Social Functions: laughter contribute to social cohesion, interaction and social stability. Laughter plays a role in establishing hierarchy, resolving conflicts, or reinforcing communal identity.

Expression and Variations: The features of laughter in most African cultures generally include: vocalizations, gestures, or expressions associated with it.

Gender and Laughter: Gender plays a determinant role in laughter specifically in social harmony, conflict resolution, character formation and values.

Humor and Power Dynamics: The Zarma in Niger Republic for instance attribute to Men the feature of fire while women are seen with the characteristics of water. There is generally in traditional societies a subtle form of resistance against the authority of men with an instrumentalization of laughter.



The African Laughter (Cont'd)

Political engagements: Laughter can serve as an instrument for political gains by deceit and deception. .

Laughter in Rituals and Ceremonies: In *Religion, Spirituality and Thought in Traditional Africa* by Dominique Zahan, John Mbiti *African Religions and Philosophy. The two great works on the life and thinking of the African articulate different polarities in the religion, spirituality and thought of African people through traditional rituals, ceremonies, or performances.* In some rituals and ceremonies, the living seldom laugh with the dead or the ancestors

Psychological and Health Aspects: Laughter has some psychological and health impacts on individuals and communities. Laughter contribute to mental well-being and resilience. The “epidemic laughter in Tanzania in 1962” is an illustration

Globalization and Changing Laughter Dynamics: There is an undisputable fact that globalization and modernization, media, emerging technologies impact the nature and our modes of expression and communication in Africa and beyond. Sekai Nzenza and the changing world.

Laughter dynamics in a changing world

Analyzing African laughter requires an understanding of cultural contexts, historical influences, and contemporary dynamics.





African Laughter as rejection and protest

The science of laughter and humour is known as Gelotology.

(Leonardo.S. (2012) Gelotology derives from two Greek words, gelos and logos. Gelos meaning laughter and logos meaning study.

Studying Laughter in Africa is an interrogation of the sociohistorical conditions that ground the repackaging of laughter in modern forms that serve as a therapy for social and emotional distress.

Laugfhter as become a business with modern comedy and comic performances

The proliferation of professionals of laughter in Nigeria and some other African countries testify to the fact that there is a correlation between laughter and the sociopolitical and economic situation of a nation. The emergence of many African comedians not only testify to the social relevance of laughter but the capacity of laughter to be a life force on its own.

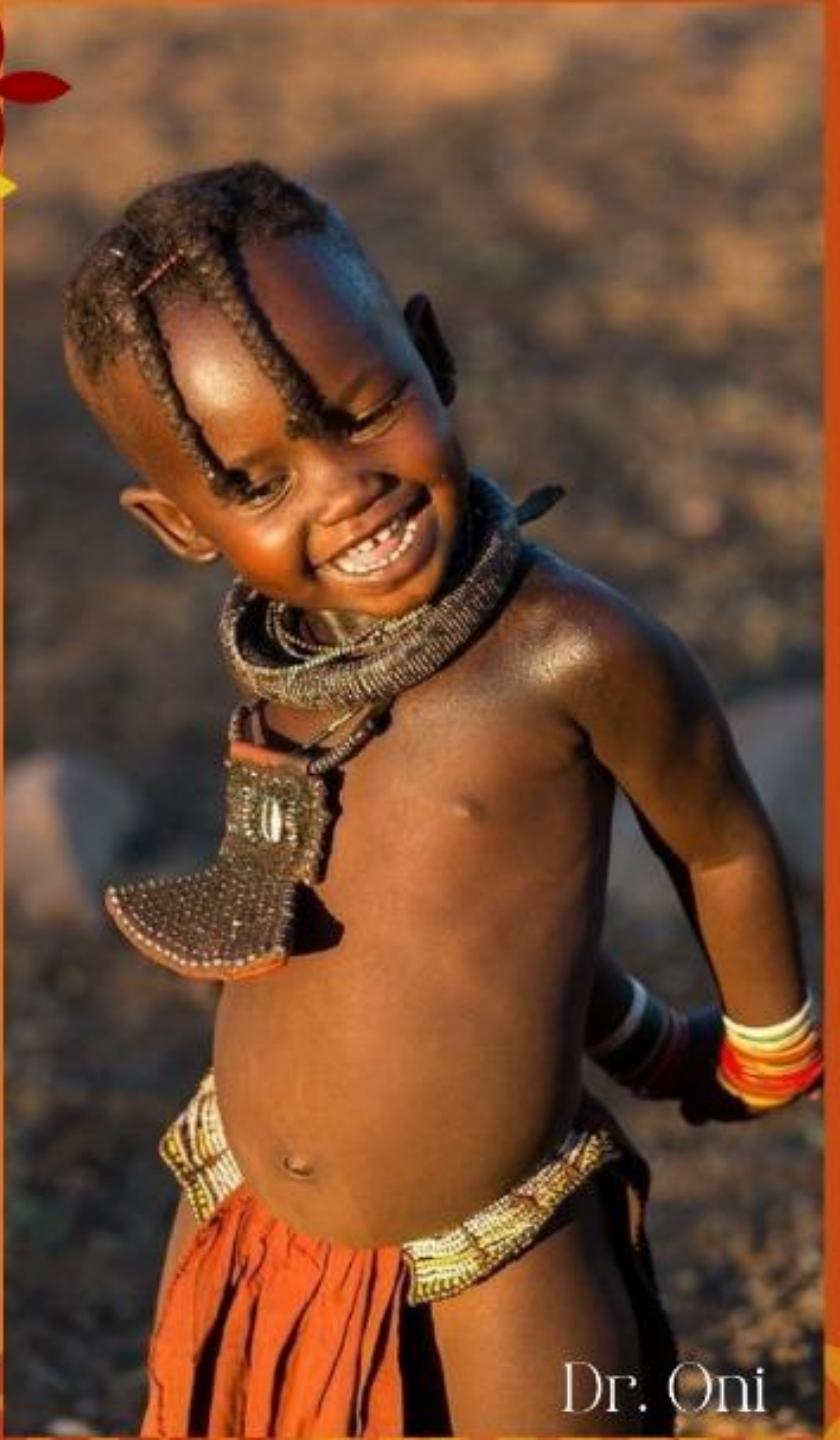
Many comedians and humorists in Africa engage in gainful enterprise contribute meaningfully the transformative process of peaceful life.



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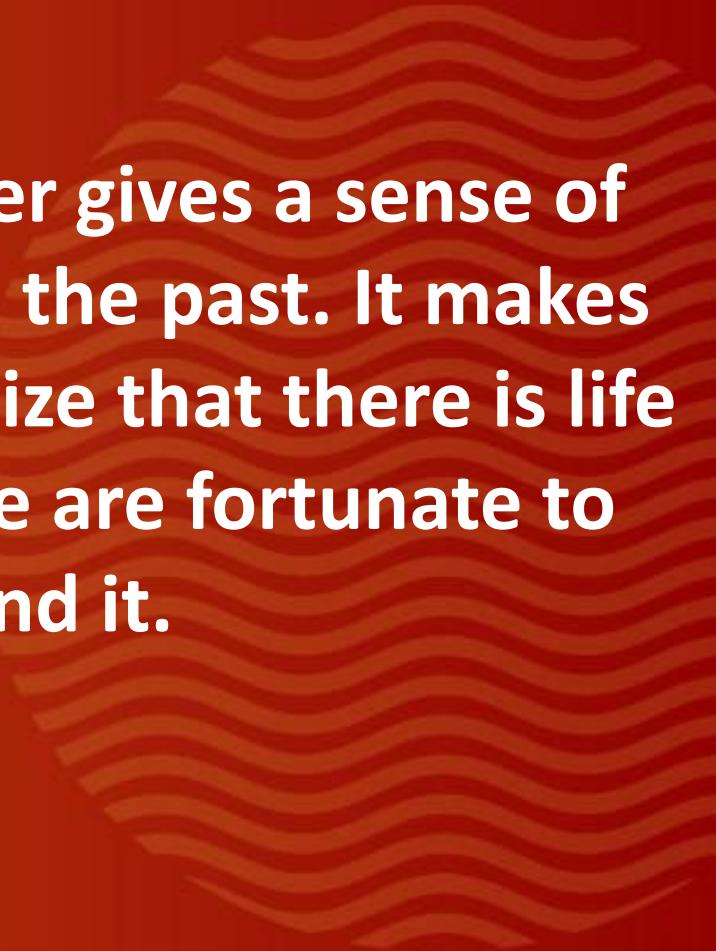


FINAL WORDS



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African laughter gives a sense of continuity with the past. It makes us, Africans realize that there is life in us only if we are fortunate to find it.



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Laughter is contagious when shared
but needs no cure.

THANK YOU

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