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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Joking, joke telling and the making of mutuality in the South African Lowveld

Isak Niehaus

Brunel, University of London, Uxbridge, UK
Email: Isak.Niehaus@brunel.ac.uk

Abstract

In this article I endorse the contention that humour presents a window onto the complicated social relationships and consciousness of speakers and listeners. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in Bushbuckridge, South Africa, I observe that improvised joking and the telling of standard jokes have proliferated over the past three decades. I suggest that we can understand both forms of humour as bids to construct intimate interpersonal relations, based on mutuality, in times of increased precarity. There are, nonetheless, important differences between these forms of humour. In Bushbuckridge, a long tradition of spontaneous and improvised joking between certain categories of persons stood at the very heart of kinship. The association of such joking with intimacy was evident in the general rule that one was only allowed to joke, particularly about sexual matters, with persons one was allowed to see naked. By engaging in such joking, villagers reinforced mutuality with kin, upon whom they relied for social security. By contrast, the (re)telling of standard jokes is a fairly recent practice. Unlike in joking between kin, the original composers of the jokes are anonymous and the butt of the jokes are fictitious third persons. This insulates listeners from direct embarrassment and the teller from retaliation. These jokes were told between male peers, and commented on the diminished status of men in contemporary times. By telling standard jokes, men provoked 'laugher out of place', in a bid to re-establish sociality in moments of distress and extend mutuality beyond the domains of kinship networks.

Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur soutient l'idée que l'humour offre une fenêtre sur les relations sociales compliquées et la conscience des locuteurs et des auditeurs. En s'appuyant sur des recherches ethnographiques menées à Bushbuckridge, en Afrique du Sud, il observe une prolifération des plaisanteries improvisées et des blagues classiques au cours des trois dernières décennies. Il suggère que ces deux formes d'humour peuvent être interprétées comme des tentatives de construire des relations interpersonnelles intimes, fondées sur la mutualité, en période de précarité accrue. Il existe néanmoins d'importantes différences entre ces formes d'humour. À Bushbuckridge, une longue tradition de plaisanteries spontanées et improvisées entre certaines catégories de personnes était au coeur même de la parenté. L'association de ces plaisanteries à l'intimité était évidente dans la règle générale

selon laquelle il n'était permis de plaisanter, notamment sur des sujets sexuels, qu'avec des personnes que l'on était autorisé à voir nues. En se livrant à de telles plaisanteries, les villageois renforçaient la mutualité avec la parenté dont ils dépendaient pour leur protection sociale. En revanche, le fait de (re)raconter des blagues classiques est une pratique relativement récente. Contrairement aux plaisanteries de parenté, les auteurs des blagues sont anonymes et les cibles sont des tiers fictifs. Cela protège les auditeurs d'une gêne directe et le narrateur de représailles. Ces blagues étaient racontées entre pairs masculins et commentaient la perte de statut des hommes à l'époque contemporaine. En racontant des blagues classiques, les hommes provoquaient des « rires incongrus », dans l'espoir de rétablir la sociabilité dans des moments de détresse, et d'étendre la mutualité au-delà des réseaux de parenté.

Resumo

Neste artigo, defendo a ideia de que o humor é uma janela para as complexas relações sociais e a consciência de quem fala e de quem ouve. Com base numa pesquisa etnográfica de longo prazo em Bushbuckridge, na África do Sul, observo que as piadas improvisadas e as piadas tradicionais se proliferaram nas últimas três décadas. Sugiro que podemos entender ambas as formas de humor como tentativas de construir relações interpessoais íntimas, baseadas na reciprocidade, em tempos de crescente precariedade. No entanto, existem diferenças importantes entre estas formas de humor. Em Bushbuckridge, uma longa tradição de piadas espontâneas e improvisadas entre certas categorias de pessoas estava no cerne do parentesco. A associação entre essas brincadeiras e a intimidade era evidente na regra geral de que só era permitido brincar, especialmente sobre assuntos sexuais, com pessoas que se podia ver nuas. Ao participar nessas brincadeiras, os aldeões reforçavam a mutualidade com os parentes, de quem dependiam para a segurança social. Em contrapartida, o (re)contar piadas padrão é uma prática bastante recente. Ao contrário das piadas entre parentes, os autores originais das piadas são anónimos e os alvos das piadas são terceiros fictícios. Isto isola os ouvintes do embaraço direto e o contador da retaliação. Estas piadas eram contadas entre pares do sexo masculino e comentavam o estatuto diminuído dos homens na contemporaneidade. Ao contar piadas padrão, os homens provocavam 'risos fora de lugar', numa tentativa de restabelecer a sociabilidade em momentos de angústia e estender a mutualidade para além dos domínios das redes de parentesco.

During long-term fieldwork in the Bushbuckridge municipality of the South African Lowveld, I observed that there had been a proliferation of spontaneous joking between kin. I also learned that men had begun to (re)tell standard jokes to acquaintances at places of socialization. As an example of the latter, several research participants told me a joke about a fictitious man accused of rape. In a country afflicted with an alarmingly high incidence of sexual violence, such accusations are not uncommon.[1] The man feared that he would be found guilty and he consulted a well-known herbalist (*ngaka*) because he could not think of any credible defence. This,

[1] The rate of sexual violence in South Africa is among the highest recorded in the world. During 2009–10, crime statistics released by the South African Police Services showed a rape rate of 96 per 100,000 people. By 2019–20, this figure had declined to 72 (see <https://www.saps.gov.za/services/crimestats.php>, accessed 19 July 2023).

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too, was not uncommon. Many accused use herbal potions dispensed by skilled herbalists to secure favourable verdicts in court.

The herbalist appeared confident and assertive. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'Take this herb! Put it in your pocket and rub it! The herb will temporarily make your penis disappear! Then you approach the judge and tell him that you could not possibly have perpetrated rape! Call him aside and show him that you have no penis! Then you return to me, and I will make your penis reappear!' Though uncertain of the herb's power, the accused man did as the diviner had instructed him. After the charges against him were read out, he approached the bench and said, 'Your honour, something is wrong! Can I please see you in private?' Once they had retreated to the judge's chambers, he pulled down his trousers to show that he was both a eunuch and a-phallic. The judge was shaken, resumed his position at the bench, slammed his gavel and proclaimed, 'Case dismissed!'

Overjoyed at the case's outcome, the man immediately returned to the herbalist's home. In the sandy roads outside, he saw nearly a hundred parked cars, some from as far afield as Gauteng. The man assumed that they belonged to customers and that their presence attested to the herbalist's renown. But once he reached the gate, he learned a nasty lesson. 'Where is the herbalist?' he asked the first person he encountered. 'I am sorry,' replied the relative. 'He died. We are here to bury him. He will be sorely missed.' The man was dismayed and, in an anxious state, asked: 'Did he leave me any herbs? Did he leave me any advice?' But the mourners had no idea what he was talking about. This part of the joke that referred to the man's desperate agony invariably provoked the most laughter among listeners.

In this article I explore what the general increase in joking and in the relatively new practice of (re)telling jokes about characters such as a-phallic rapists reveal about social relations and consciousness in contemporary rural South Africa. To do so I draw on what I have learned during multiple visits to Impalahoek,[2] a village in Bushbuckridge, each year since 1990.[3] With a population of about 24,000 Northern Sotho- and Tsonga-speaking people, the village is a marginal place in the country's political economy. During the period of apartheid, Impalahoek formed part of Lebowa 'homeland' for the Northern Sotho 'ethnic national unit'. Household income was derived primarily from the remittances of male migrant labourers employed in the country's centres of mining and industry. After the election of a democratic South African government in 1994, the village was incorporated into the newly established Mpumalanga Province. The presidencies of Nelson Mandela (1994–99) and Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008) were optimistic times. The South African economy sustained an average GDP growth of 4.2 per cent (UN 2023), facilitating the growth of a small middle class, improved welfare, the provision of social housing and the construction of shopping malls. But, at the same time, villagers had to contend with the devastating impacts of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, an upsurge in crime and de-industrialization. Conditions worsened substantially under the presidencies of Jacob Zuma (2009–18)

[2] I use pseudonyms to describe the village where I conducted fieldwork and all personal names. I have decided not to censor any lewd jokes because this practice would incorrectly convey an image of sexual prudishness in joking and joke telling. Unless otherwise specified, all local terms are in Northern Sotho.

[3] I have visited Impalahoek since 1990. Over the past decade, these visits have usually occurred during the winter months of August and early September.

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and Cyril Ramaphosa (2018–23). GDP growth declined to 0.6 per cent, unemployment rose to 32.1 per cent, and youth unemployment to 59.7 per cent (Gumbi 2023). In this situation, many young adults were unable to secure employment, marry or establish independent households. They were compelled to depend on kin or the pensions of elders, or to engage in precarious entrepreneurial activities.

The ethnographic information that I present derives not only from participant observation during earlier visits, but also from open-ended interviews with twenty research participants, specifically on the topics of joking and joke telling, that took place during the winter of 2023. Unfortunately, my fieldwork is biased towards men's perspectives. In Impalahoek, joke telling most commonly occurred between persons of the same gender, and most of the jokes I recorded were relayed to me at places of masculine socialization, such as drinking taverns and men's seating spaces in homestead courtyards.

My central argument is that in Impalahoek, as elsewhere in Southern Africa, both joking and joke telling constitute bids to construct relations based on intimacy and mutuality in an increasingly insecure social environment. Intimacy denotes a kind of trust based on the sharing of secrets, a kind of trust that one denies to outsiders (Simmel 1950: 330–4; Herzfeld 1997). I use the concept of mutuality in a performative sense, to denote interactive participation in each other's lives (Sahlins 2013: 2). According to Golomski (2020: 274–5), performative mutuality denotes the interpenetration of each other's existence without eradicating difference. It implies a temporary convergence of realities and is enlivening rather than empowering and substantially transformative.

I suggest that in Impalahoek the telling of standard jokes emerged alongside the more established tradition of improvised joking between different categories of kin. In his classical essays on these topics, Radcliffe-Brown (1940; 1949) describes such joking as a form of 'permitted disrespect' that occurs in recognized 'joking relationships'. A person teases and makes fun of another, who must accept the joking with good humour, without taking offence. Radcliffe-Brown argues that such joking expresses a peculiar combination of 'pretence of hostility' and 'real friendliness', and constitutes an attempt to manage potentially tense social relations, marked by a simultaneous conjunction and disjunction of interests (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 195, 196). However, he distinguished between symmetrical and asymmetrical joking relationships. In the former case there is an assertion of equality, but in the latter, disrespect is permitted in only one direction. In Impalahoek, as a general rule, people were permitted to joke, particularly about sexual matters, only with the categories of persons one was permitted to see naked. This reinforced the association of spontaneous, even asymmetrical joking with intimacy in the domestic domain.

In Radcliffe-Brown's terms, the practice of (re)telling standard jokes was more appropriate to 'consocial' than 'contractual' relationships (1940: 208–10). People generally told standard jokes to their age mates, such as classmates at school, colleagues at work, friends in the neighbourhood, and drinking partners in taverns. While improvised joking occurred in dyadic relations and disrespected the listener, the (re)telling of standard jokes, like gossip, occurred between co-evals and disrespected an absent third party. But unlike gossip, these jokes referred to fictitious men who failed to cope with confusing modern conditions or to live up to masculine ideals in times of economic downturn. I argue that by telling jokes about people such

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as the a-phallic rapist, villagers attempted to socialize the isolating aspects of fear and extend mutuality beyond kinship networks.

Joking and avoidance, intimacy and respect in kinship networks

Two different ethnic traditions of joking prevailed in Bushbuckridge. Northern Sotho speakers drew a stark contrast between avoidance and joking as alternative strategies for managing kinship relations. Avoidance expressed respect and was appropriate to hierarchical relations, such as those with one's father and paternal relatives, who were responsible for discipline, and, parents-in-law, to whom one was indebted for one's spouse. Asymmetrical joking by grandparents, the mother's brother, and older siblings and parallel cousins[4] affirmed mutuality between persons of different age-based categories. Symmetrical and sexual joking between cross-cousins,[5] lovers, spouses and same-sex age mates, in turn, expressed intimacy and equality.

In the Shangaan tradition, by contrast, joking was more restrictive. Only adult men were entitled to joke, and they joked only with women they could marry as secondary wives (with their sister's daughter, wife's brother's daughter and wife's younger sister). Doris Gumede, a seventy-year-old woman diviner, highlighted the contrast and associated joking with unwanted sexual intimacy:

> We Shangaans are strict people. If children talk, laugh and make funny jokes, they will end up doing silly things. A brother might end up sleeping with his sister. There must be respect. There must be a boundary.

Research participants observed that, over time, there had been greater licence in joking, and that in cases of ethnic-intermarriage the Northern Sotho model had become hegemonic. Consequently, joking had become more pervasive and symmetrical, and the younger generation had begun to joke with new categories of persons, such as siblings, mothers, lovers, spouses and peers. A senior man, who worked as a fruit and vegetable vendor, observed: 'Today, youngsters will tell someone of the same age, "You have a donkey's nose." When I was young, the elders would whip us for saying this.' While he and other elders were nostalgic about the period of greater restrictions, younger research participants celebrated this trend.

Grandparents: the dynamics of asymmetrical joking

Research participants agreed with Radcliffe-Brown's (1950: 28) assertion that children's relations with their grandparents were closer than those with their parents. They argued that grandparents saw grandchildren naked when they were babies and could, therefore, joke with them. A grandmother could ritually 'smoke' her grandsons. She would touch his genitals, put her hand to her nose and comment on the smell of his 'tobacco' (*kwae*) (Murray 1975: 158–77). Likewise, a grandfather could smell his baby granddaughter's breasts. They did this to assess the new generation's reproductive capacity.

[4] A person's parallel cousins are their mother's sister's daughter, mother's sister's son, father's brother's daughter and father's brother's son.

[5] A person's cross-cousins are their mother's brother's daughter, mother's brother's son, father's sister's daughter and father's sister's son.

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As babies matured, joking would be confined to grandchildren of the same gender. Men recalled that their grandfathers warned them of the dangers of sexual intercourse and sometimes made derogatory comments about their potential as spouses and providers. A young man distinctly recalled his grandfather's wittiness. He would boast and say, 'I can play soccer [football] better than you. With my walking stick, I can outrun you.' At other times, his grandfather would say, 'Go and look for a young lady for me among your peers so that I can share a blanket with her tonight. I'll take *bangalala mbuti* [herbs for impotence].' Only very occasionally would grandchildren retaliate in response to the joking of their favourite grandparent. For example, a girl might call her grandfather 'my young man' (*jaha wa mina*) or a boy might say, 'You're too forgetful.' But sexual joking remained the prerogative of grandparents.

Parents, uncles and aunts: the dialectics of intimacy and respect

In Impalahoek, relations with fathers were marked by exaggerated respect (*hlonipa*). After babyhood, fathers avoided seeing their children naked. Fathers visited their sons at the circumcision lodge but never inspected their circumcision wounds. They also refrained from entering their children's bedrooms. Paulina Mashile, who was in her thirties, swam with friends at a tourist resort. Although she wore a respectable bathing costume, she immediately wrapped a towel around her body when her stepfather and I arrived at the pool. 'My stepfather,' she said, 'should not see me half-naked.' Fathers disciplined and reprimanded children for unbecoming conduct and motivated them, but never in any manner that could be interpreted as amusing. A man in his early sixties recalled that he would never sit down with his father. Whenever his father entered a room, he and his siblings departed. They never asked their father where he had been, never called him, and never broached topics that might make him uncomfortable.

By contrast, children occasionally joked with their mothers, with whom they entertained more intimate relations. Lucky Ubisi told me that, in recent years, he had begun teasing his mother. He remembered telling her, 'Mum, you dress like a grandparent [*magogo*]. If you don't update your wardrobe, dad might leave you.' He also joked, 'Mum, you cook so badly. Do you get your recipes from the circumcision lodge?' To this, she replied: 'Son, you don't know fashion. Even your father dresses better than you. I've never seen you with a girlfriend.' Paulina Mashile, a single mother, regularly sent her only son, a student at a university in the Eastern Cape, jokes as text messages. She was unconcerned that he might see her in a bathing costume. 'One day, when I am old and weak,' she said, 'he might have to take care of me.'

Children extended sentiments from their parents to their parents' siblings. They treated the father's older brother (*ramogolo*), younger brother (*rangwane*) and sister (*rakgadi*) with respect; and the mother's older sister (*mamogolo*), younger sister (*mangwane*) and brother (*malome*) with intimacy. The most egalitarian and intimate ties were with the mother's brother, who was considered to be her junior.[6] This is

[6] Villagers sometimes called the mother's brother 'grandfather' and his wife 'grandmother'. Through such legal fiction they cease to belong to the first ascending generation.

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because he acquired bridewealth cattle for his marriage from hers, and was therefore indebted to her (Kuper 1982: 36–8). Nakedness also came into play. The mother's brother, not the father, inspected his nephews' circumcision wounds when he visited them at the circumcision lodge.

The mother's brother joked with nephews about their conduct and appearance and reminded them of occasions when they drank too much alcohol or acted stupidly under the influence of cannabis. Gladys Mogakane recalled that when she was young, her maternal uncle would ask: 'Who am I?' Then he would bite her on the arm in a playful manner and say: 'I am the *malome*' (*go loma* means 'to bite'). These jokes were traditionally asymmetrical. However, in recent years, nephews who are particularly close to their maternal uncle have begun to retaliate. In one instance, a nephew reversed the relationship by calling his maternal uncle 'nephew' (*ntsokulu*). Nephews also admonished their maternal uncle for stinginess. Justice Malatsi complained that his uncle allowed him to take only two slices of bread to school. 'This means that I won't ever grow up.' But there was a clear limit: the nephew's jokes should not refer to sexual matters, and jokes should be amusing rather than disrespectful. Godfrey Nokeri, who was Northern Sotho, bordered on the limits of acceptability when he replied to his Shangaan uncle's comments about his drinking by saying, '*Malome,* you do *muchongolo* [traditional Shangaan dancing], and you have a polo neck [foreskin]. I'll take you to the circumcision lodge.'[7] His joking was excused because of his wittiness and the closeness of their relationship.

In-laws and affines: the intricacies of avoidance

The most extreme respect and avoidance occurred between young adults and their parents-in-law. Much gossip in Impalahoek referred to a scandalous incident in which a young man slept at his girlfriend's home. They were both naked and opened the bedroom window because it was hot. Unfortunately, her brother came home from a tavern early in the morning hours and climbed through his sister's window. When the boyfriend heard him, he escaped to the living room. But to his surprise, her parents were there, watching late-night television. The young man was so ashamed that he terminated their relationship. Like nakedness, joking was anathema to the respect one should display to your partner's parents.

Avoidance behaviour was most extreme during courtship before any bridewealth had been paid. Refilwe Chiloane told me that when her boyfriend attended her sister's 'baby shower', he stayed outside the yard and conversed only with friends. She, in turn, felt deeply embarrassed when she encountered his mother at his apartment in Pretoria. Refilwe used the plural '*lona*' rather than the singular '*wena*' to greet her and kept the conversation to the absolute minimum.[8] During bridewealth negotiations, the prospective groom and bride were represented by relatives such as the mother's brother or father's sister and were forbidden to witness the proceedings. Should the negotiators need to speak to the groom, they would communicate by mobile phone.

[7] Traditionally, Shangaan men, unlike their Northern Sotho peers, do not circumcise. This has changed. In recent years, some Shangaan boys do attend the circumcision lodges and others are circumcised in hospital.

[8] Agha (2007: 334–40) writes that it is common cross-culturally for the 'respectful' form of address to be displaced from the second person singular to either the second person plural or some third person form.

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But as the affinal tie was cemented by marriage, absolute avoidance gave way to polite rule-governed behaviour. After a bride had taken up residence in the home of her in-laws, she could talk with her husband's mother and with his siblings, but not with his father. A husband's visit to his wife's parents was a formal occasion: he was obliged to wear a jacket, use formal greetings and act humbly. He should never share a couch with his father-in-law, never eat everything on his plate, nor break any bones in the meat he had been given to eat, because this would show dissatisfaction. The husband continued to be indebted to his parents-in-law because the value of his wife always exceeded that of the bridewealth he paid.

Siblings and cousins: joking in the lateral generation

The most pervasive joking occurred between members of one's own generation. As a general rule, restrained non-sexual joking prevailed between uterine siblings and parallel cousins (who were classificatory siblings). Such joking was asymmetrical and mediated by age. This is similar to the practice that older siblings might see younger siblings naked but not vice versa. Brothers and sisters could see each other naked only when they were young. By the age of eight or nine years, a sister had to close the door of her room when she changed clothes. The joking of older siblings tended to be pedagogical in that they drew attention to the unbecoming conduct of younger siblings. Tumelo Dibakwane told me that he once teased his younger brother, who had been playing in the streets. 'Dimrose!' he said. 'You are so dusty. You look like a ghost. We can't see your colour.' To confirm this style of joking, I observed Thuso Sekgobela tell his youngest brother, 'Richard, you only bathe when you visit your girlfriend.' During my visits to her home, Gladys Mogale regularly addressed her younger sister by the nickname 'Daily Sun' (after a tabloid newspaper). This, she told me, was because her sister often spoke of events that she knew little about and greatly embellished her accounts of what happened. Junior siblings seldom retaliated; instead, they treated their father's older brother's children with the greatest respect. As a research participant explained: 'If you joke with the sons of your *ramogolo*, you're playing with fire.'

By contrast, greater licence prevailed in joking between cross-cousins. This practice should be seen in the context of an earlier tradition of preferential cross-cousin marriage among Northern Sotho speakers. These marriages were considered ideal because they created a circuit in the exchange of cattle between the households of a brother and sister (Kuper 1982: 75). Cross-cousins hardly marry any more. Yet memories of these marriages were very much alive. As a young research participant explained to me: 'The cousin is the wife chosen for us by the ancestors.' It was entirely permissible to see cross-cousins naked, regardless of their age. Patricia Mashile told me that if she wished to change from jeans to a dress at a party, she would do so in her cousin's room. Much banter between cross-cousins centred on marriage. A young man might call his woman cousin '*my skat*' ('my treasure' in Afrikaans), or post the message 'you look beautiful, my wife' on her Facebook page. He could also make derogatory comments about her partner: 'Your boyfriend is so ugly. He is so dark. It seems that he has a liver problem ... Don't you see how beautiful I am?' A Northern Sotho-speaking woman once feigned anger towards her cross-cousin's wife. 'Why did you take my husband?' she asked. 'Are there no men where you come from?' Unfortunately, her cousin's wife cried bitterly – she was Shangaan and did not grasp the joke.

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The insults traded between cross-cousins broached topics such as money and politics that would otherwise be out of bounds. The general elections of 2019 were characterized by a fierce contest between the African National Congress (ANC) and Bushbuckridge Residents Association (BRA). Before election day, Mike Manzini greeted his cross-cousin, George Zandela, who campaigned for the ANC and faced regular financial problems. 'Hey, Absent No Contract! Hey, moneylender [*machonisa*]! Don't you even have 50 cents? Let me buy you trousers.' George retorted: 'Hey, Baboon Runs Around! You're a fool!' The greetings ended in laughter. Even in these tense situations, the offender was not the joker, but rather the person who took offence and failed to play along and respond in kind.

Lewdness in romance and marriage

Even the lewdest jokes are appropriate between spouses and lovers. According to a male research participant: 'One can joke with your wife 100 per cent. I can say to her, "You cried too much when we had sex last night. I saw tears in your eyes." To this, she might reply: "Stop joking. You did nothing to me."' Lovers could also banter and comment on each other's appearance in the most unflattering manner. Doris Shokane told me about an incident that occurred when she and her boyfriend saw a white woman walk from a nearby supermarket. The boyfriend immediately commented: 'There goes your sister. You have the same shape. Her buttocks are also as flat as an ironing board.' Kago Mohale nicknamed her boyfriend *nyopfi* (anus) and regularly reminded him that she was more attractive than any of his previous girlfriends. But even in the most intimate of relations, joking had its limits. Some partners were known to be touchy, and joking was more restrained when the man was substantially older than his female partner.

To summarize this discussion, in Impalahoek improvised joking, in which the speaker disrespects the listener, is largely confined to specific paired social categories, termed 'joking relationships' in anthropological discourse (Radcliffe-Brown 1940; 1949). In fact, we can see avoidance and joking as the enactment of prescribed behaviour that stands at the very heart of kinship. Whereas avoidance of social intercourse with parents-in-law and fathers was an attempt to forestall conflict, joking was a bid to reaffirm intimacy. Hence, the proliferation of joking was an attempt to create trust between kin in the contexts of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, growing unemployment and marital breakdown. A survey of eighty-seven households in Impalahoek in 2004 showed that whereas 50 per cent of children (251 out of 496) resided in the same household as their father, 89 per cent (444 out of 496) resided in the same household as their mother (Niehaus 2018: 47). Another survey of sixty-three AIDS orphans in Impalahoek in 2014 showed that eighteen (29 per cent) relied on grandparents, ten (16 per cent) on siblings and forty-three (68 per cent) on maternal kin as their primary carers (*ibid.*: 142).

Joke telling and the broadening of mutuality

Within Impalahoek, neighbours could not engage in the same disrespectful improvised joking that characterized kinship and affinity-based joking relationships. Same-sex age mates were the only exception. They used fictive kin terms to address

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each other and engaged in the same symmetrical joking as cross-cousins. Research participants deemed this practice to be appropriate because peers saw each other naked at circumcision lodges, when swimming in rivers, and showering after football matches. This was also the case among girls, who jointly underwent initiation rites.

In an interview, Johannes Dilebo told me that after he joined the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), his close friend, Petrus Dibakwane, told him: 'You first go to diviners and then to church. Are you afraid of death? Watch out! There are thugs in that church. You might join them, killing children.'[9] Later, when Johannes had eyelid surgery, Petrus joked that he had 'chameleon eyes'. Johannes retaliated:

> Petrus, I've never seen you with a woman. It seems to me that all your sperm is in your brain. That's why your mind is disturbed. Watch out! The woman you dream of at night be a *tokolotsi* [an ape-like witch familiar]. Wear a condom when you sleep! The *tokolotsi* might have AIDS![10]

Women age mates also engaged in reciprocal teasing about the shapes and sizes of their bodies, and the unworthiness of their boyfriends.

Another form of joking occurred during stick-fighting contests. When boys returned from circumcision lodges, teams of young men from different village sections assembled. As individual contestants fought using flexible sticks cut from willow trees and cowhide shields, their fellow team members sang songs disparaging their opponents. I recorded the following lyrics.

Brother-in-law, you disrespect us	*Sebara o yadelela*
but you will fry like eggs	*o byaya makata*
You bother my sister brother-in-law	*Se ohlapa sesi sebara*
you don't pay bridewealth to marry her	*re nyaka a dikgomo tsa go nyara sesi*
Hey Melino, hey Melino!	*Ye Melino, Ye Melino*
When dogs cross the valley	*Se baya deiela ya tshela*
they must lower their tails and beg	*moyedi e pata mosela tse tsons*
Kill these dogs	*Ra dibolaya*
they won't lower their tails	*digana go pata mosela*
Biza! Biza! Biza! Step back	*Biza! Biza! Biza! Dedela*
your overall is full of shit	*morago overall tlele ka masepa overall*
Leave the stick	*Bjala bio*
this man will beat you	*tlo go kwaletja*

[9] In earlier years, some villagers speculated that leaders of the ZCC engaged in ritual murder and used human body parts to manufacture medicine to attract congregants (see Ashforth 2000: 144–56).

[10] In local belief, witches send the *tokolotsi* to sexually assault or rape neighbours (Niehaus 1995).

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What is significant is that the fighters invoked the idiom of affinity to describe their relations. This practice resembled the 'tribal' joking relationships that Mitchell (1956) observed between the Bisa and Yao, Lozi and Ndebele, and Bemba and Ngoni on the Zambian Copper Belt. He argued that, by trading insults and teasing each other, these erstwhile enemies who now belonged to the same regional working class sought to forge cooperative relations. The Yao, for example, performed funeral duties for the Bisa (*ibid*.: 36–40). The solidarities that the stick-fighting teams enacted were based on residence rather than ethnicity and did not generate specific obligations. However, the pretence of hostility also eventually gave way to real friendship that always underlay the permitted disrespect. At the end of the day's fighting, hostilities ceased abruptly and erstwhile opponents roasted meat and drank beer together.

Because fictive kinship relations were voluntary, responses to such joking were unpredictable. Jabulani Mohale, an unemployed man who was a member of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and an outspoken critic of the country's current generation of political leaders, had achieved a reputation as one of the best jokers in his neighbourhood. Jabulani frequently teased casual acquaintances. He once asked the seller of home-brewed beer what percentage of alcohol her brew contained. Jabulani was deeply appreciative of her witty response. She replied: 'I don't have a percentage. I use old boots – the ones from 1976 – to brew it. My brew is so dangerous. I call it five minutes. My customers fall down in five minutes, on their way to the toilet.' But jokes could also elicit unwelcome responses. Doris Shokane, who worked as an administrative officer at the local municipality, told me that one of her colleagues took offence when she said her clothes were over-sized. Her colleague shouted, 'Piss off! Go and play with someone of your own age.' She was surprised because her colleague was only three years older than her. A popular woman headteacher of a local primary school jokingly addressed her male colleagues by fictive kinship terms and called them 'brother-in-law' or 'son'. They, in turn, called her 'wife', 'sister' or 'mother'. But she exceeded the bounds of acceptability when she called a man who regularly propositioned new women teachers a 'hyena'. He became furious, insinuated that she had accused him of professional misconduct, and demanded a formal apology.

Fights often erupted at local schools because of perceived insults. Eddy Theko told his stuttering classmate, Julius Mzimba, 'You'll never have a girlfriend because you cannot say "I love you".' After school, Julius beat Eddy with the branch of a thorn tree. Young pupils also complained to teachers that classmates said their fathers drove wrecked cars (*sekorokoro*), or that their heads were shaped like that of former president Jacob Zuma. The headteacher felt that it was her responsibility to teach them how to retaliate. She would ask the complainant, 'Does your father really drive a wrecked car? So why do you worry? Tell him that his father also drives a wrecked car.' She also taught pupils that everyone is unique and that they should accept others as they are, irrespective of how their heads are shaped.

In these contexts, research participants deemed the (re)telling of standard jokes to be more appropriate than improvised joking. Because speakers simply relayed jokes that an anonymous person had composed, they had greater licence to broach sensitive topics, and because the jokes referred to an absent third party, they saved the listener from embarrassment. Joke telling operated in roughly the same domains as gossip. Gluckman (1963) postulates that gossip is crucial to the creation of sociality

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because it shows interest in the doings of others, critically evaluates people's conduct, and runs down those who fail to live up to local values. The gossiper avoids retaliation because they scandalize opponents behind their back. Gluckman wrote of gossip: 'If your allegations are at all open to his face you must never give him grounds to state that you have insulted him. For insults of this kind, if open, make impossible the pretence of group amity' (*ibid*.: 313). But whereas gossip targets actual people, standard jokes refer to fictitious persons.

Standard jokes had broader appeal than gossip because their understanding did not depend on thorough knowledge of local situations. But to be engaging and worthy of retelling, jokes had to conform to a recognizable narrative structure and depict situations that listeners found easy to comprehend and imagine. The jokes that I recorded during fieldwork displayed the same 'grotesque realism' Bakhtin 1984 [1965]) saw as being distinctive of popular humour in medieval Europe. Like the carnivalesque, they focused on the body, expressed bad taste, and simultaneously provoked fascination and repulsion. Like improvised joking, the standard jokes that I recorded referred to stressful situations, discreditable behaviour, dirt, excrement and sexual misconduct.

Standard jokes did not discredit powerful people. This became apparent when I asked Jabulani Mohale whether he knew any political jokes. His answer surprised me. 'No!' he said. 'We don't joke about politicians. We seldom see them. We don't have water, and we are down, but they don't care for us. But next year [2019], there is an election and they will be running about seeking our votes.' Jabulani seemed to insinuate that villagers did not tell jokes about self-serving politicians, because it was impossible to joke with them. This practice diverges from the situation elsewhere, where jokes constitute a 'weapon of the weak' that disorganizes hierarchy, mocks the pretences of rulers, and chastises their insincerity, pompousness and stupidity (Kuipers 2006). The avoidance of political jokes seemed to express the impossibility of mutuality with politicians, rather than the exaggerated respect associated with fathers, senior paternal kin and parents-in-law. It also expressed a latent recognition that telling jokes about powerful people does not 'check' their power but reinforces the current situation. So, the avoidance of political jokes in itself is a powerful form of resistance.

Later, Jabulani seemed to contradict himself, and proceeded to tell a joke about Nelson Mandela, the founding president of South Africa's democracy. During an interview, a magazine journalist asked Mandela what music he enjoyed. Mandela replied in his usual slow, low-pitched, gravelly voice: 'I most like jazz. In *kwaito* [a genre of South African house music], I like Alaska and Trompies.' Then the journalist asked, 'Which musical groups don't you like?' Mandela replied: 'I dislike Boom Shaha.' When asked why, the elderly statesman replied: 'Because Lebo [Mathosa] and Thembi [Seete] [scantily dressed women vocalists and dancers] make me feel horny [*totisa*, sexually aroused].' Jabulani's Mandela joke diverged significantly from the jokes about opportunistic politicians he claimed not to know, and affirmed mutuality between alternate generations in a manner that resonated with the joking relationship with grandparents.[11] The joke depicted Mandela as

[11] Golomski (2020) observes that joking between Swazi-speaking black female staff and Afrikaans-speaking residents of an old age home in Mpumalanga does not consciously replicate indigenous cultural models of alternate joking relations. Joking nonetheless provides a licence for playfully interacting with each other and for broaching otherwise taboo subjects such as race and declining cognitive and physical abilities.

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sharing the musical tastes of the younger generation; but, at the same time, his discomfort with feelings of sexual arousal set him apart from more virile youngsters.

My research assistant, Mahlatsi Mohlala, told a joke about a grandmother that also expressed mutuality between alternate generations. The grandmother saw a curved plasma television set in a furniture store and asked the shop assistant whether it was specifically manufactured for a circular rondavel hut. Here, humour lies in the paradoxical association of ultra-modern technology with traditional architecture. Today, it is only diviners who build circular huts for ancestral spirits. These standard jokes have a broader remit than improvised joking between alternate generations, for they can be told from the perspective of young people, and they enable greater reflexivity about contemporary conditions.

Jabulani's assertion that one tells standard jokes about those with whom one can joke describes only a very general tendency. None of the jokes that I recorded were specifically about mothers, maternal uncles, younger siblings or cross-cousins. Instead, the butt of standard jokes were people who appeared as either 'stupid' or 'canny' (Davies 1990). In most jokes, the stupid were men who were unable to assert themselves because of their ignorance, lack of education or drunkenness. These jokes broached a sensitive topic, because the idiot (*sepokopoko*), madman (*mogafa*) and fool (*mpara*) were pervasive masculine counter-types. Moreover, in Impalahoek, mental illness was deeply stigmatizing and was a prominent cause of male suicides (Niehaus 2012: 331–2). The stupid person is exemplified in two jokes, one about a drunkard and one about an incompetent cattle farmer, that a man told his friends who drank beer in the shade of a large pepper tree in his yard. The drunkard walked home from a tavern in the early morning hours. At a river crossing, he encountered a pastor baptizing congregants. Without understanding what was happening, he joined the queue. When it was his turn, the pastor dunked his head in the water and asked, 'Did you see Jesus?' To this, the drunkard replied, 'No! I did not! Are you sure Jesus drowned here?' The cattle owner was exceptionally envious of his neighbour, whose cows calved each year. After enquiring, he told his peers that his neighbour's cows were so fertile because his neighbour fed them Chin Cen and Silver Bullet (aphrodisiacs sold in local pharmacies). He himself fed his cattle *mshoshaphantsi* (literally, 'hidden movement'), a herbal concoction witches allegedly use to have sexual intercourse with their victims from a remote distance. The use of witchcraft as a tool in sexual assault generally renders women victims infertile (Niehaus 2001: 75–6). In these jokes, the hopelessness of these situations provoked laughter, but also the juxtaposition of drinking and religious worship, humans and cattle, and pharmaceuticals and witchcraft.

The canny, in Davies's (1990) terms, were marginal persons, such as Mozambican migrants and women sex workers, who outfoxed arrogant local men. In many jokes, Mozambican immigrants, who constitute an underclass in the South African Lowveld (Rodgers 2008), were trickster-like figures. An unemployed man who hosted me at his home told me a joke about an impoverished and uneducated Mozambican called Jugando, who travelled by bus from his workplace in Johannesburg to the international border post at Ressano Garcia. Here, he told the South African border guards, 'I want to cross the Mananga border for one rand' (*Ninge dabble Mananga make one rand*). The South Africans laughed at his stupidity and scolded him: 'That will never happen! You only come to our country to steal our beautiful women!' Jugando

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said nothing, and let the guards go to bed. The next morning, they discovered that he had defecated in their porridge, left one rand, and successfully crossed the border.

While sitting in my car outside a drinking tavern, waiting for friends, Jabulani Mohale told a joke about a cheated sex worker who took revenge against an arrogant male customer. The man knocked at the door of her small home, unzipped his trousers, and hastily set about his business. When she asked for 300 rand, he screamed at her, 'Fuck you! I won't pay a cent.' The sex worker calmly replied: 'You'll return!' At home, the arrogant man tried to urinate only to discover that his penis had disappeared. Some hours later, he was back at her home, begging her to return his penis. She asked him to settle his debts and pay an additional 50 rand as a penalty. Then she produced a briefcase with different penises and told him to choose one. But unfortunately, someone else had taken his penis, and he was obliged to take the white penis of an albino. At home, he feared that his wife might see his depigmented penis and even kept his trousers on when showering. But eventually his wife saw his white penis. He lied to her, saying that he had accidentally burned it on a radiator.

These jokes were self-deprecating and depicted situations in which men were the victims, not of the political elites, but of their own stupidity and of revenge by those they wronged. The jokes also expressed men's anxieties about their loss of relative privilege due to the globalization and feminization of the workforce. Such fears have occasionally culminated in violent xenophobic attacks on foreigners in South African urban areas (Reddy 2012).

Whereas the possibility of seeing someone naked was a precondition for improvised joking, nakedness was frequently a plot point in the standard jokes that I recorded. This is apparent in the jokes about the a-phallic rapist who undressed in front of the magistrate and about Nelson Mandela's ambiguity about seeing scantily dressed women dancers. Here, it was not lewdness that created a sense of intimacy or cathartic release, but rather the thematization of the ideological basis of the joking relationship. What made these jokes funny was the violation of the normative order by those who saw prohibited categories of people in a state of undress. The last joke is a slight variation on this theme, in that it depicts a man's desperate struggles to prevent his wife seeing his depigmented penis.

Standard jokes also elaborated on penis loss as a plot point in a manner that would not be possible in the case of improvised joking between kin. These jokes were gripping because they expressed fears of castration and of the diminution of men's status. Here, Bonhomme's (2016) analysis of penis-snatching rumours that swept through many parts of sub-Saharan Africa during the 1990s provides comparative insight. The rumours concerned men whose penises mysteriously disappeared or shrank after they had slight physical contact with strangers. Bonhomme sees the penis as a natural symbol that represents men's vitality. Hence, the theft of men's genitals robs them of their sexual potency, virility, regenerative potential, masculinity and 'instrumental superiority' (*ibid.*: 27). He argues that these rumours attained prominence in situations where the growing autonomy of African women threatened masculine domination (*ibid.*: 28). In Impalahoek, jokes about penis loss were uniquely appropriate in contexts of increased male unemployment.

The standard jokes that I recorded also concerned the futility of men's attempts to escape from situations of poverty, stigma and marginality. The jokes depicted men whose attempts to avert trouble simply led them to greater trouble. A local teacher

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greeted me at a local tavern and jokingly referred to the beer and packet of cigarettes he carried as 'keys to the mortuary'. Later, he proceeded to tell a joke about a man who was dismayed to discover that his neighbours had purposefully chosen not to invite him to the party they held to celebrate their son's return from the circumcision lodge. But the man devised a devious plan and decided to gate-crash the party by passing as a woman. He put on makeup and a wig, dressed in a skirt, and joined the women catering at the event. But after he drank a few beers, he forgot that he was a lady. 'It would take a woman at least an hour to finish a "quart" [a 750 millilitre bottle of beer],' the narrator said. 'But this man drank it quickly. He gave only a few gulps and finished it in a minute.' Eventually, he was so drunk that he fell down and passed out. Upon seeing his exposed genitals, the women caterers expelled him from the party.

In the world of jokes, there is no sympathy to be found for men who cannot escape from destiny. A liquor salesman arrived from Johannesburg to attend a funeral in Impalahoek and told a joke about a conversation between Mr Dog and Mr Cat, to a group of men standing in a circle. Mr Dog told Mr Cat: 'Sir, I want to lodge a complaint! People call a rapist a dog. They say a thief is a dog. They tell those who steal and don't go to church that they are dogs. I find this language insulting.' After thinking for a while, Mr Cat replied: 'Please calm down! Don't worry! The people who say these things are all dogs!' The message, it seems, is that one simply has to accept the cards you are dealt in a stoic and fatalistic manner.

In summary, we can see the telling of standard jokes, a practice that largely took place outside the context of formal joking relationships, as an attempt to extend intimacy and mutuality beyond the domain of kinship networks. From Turner's perspective, the sharing of standard jokes did not amount to the enactment of social roles, but constituted a ritual-in-miniature that suspended usual behavioural norms to create a sense of communitas – as undifferentiated material out of which sociality is built (Turner 1969: 69). This sense of communitas was, nonetheless, profoundly gendered and joke telling occurred largely between same-sex peers. The jokes men told about the failures of fictitious others provoked 'laughter out of place' (Goldstein 2003), turned tragedy into amusement, and established sociality in moments of distress (Hernann 2016).

Conclusions

Seirlis (2011) wrote that the period following South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 saw the mushrooming of venues for stand-up comedy. She relates this to a new-found freedom of expression. The humour of comedians such as Mel Miller and Trevor Noah has an experimental quality. Some performers portray Afrikaners, South Africa's former rulers, negatively as relics of an unhappy past, while others feel obliged to lampoon the ANC government's corruption and inappropriate policies in relation to HIV/AIDS. Seirlis also detects a new wave of gallows humour, about topics such as violence, crime and emigration. However, it is unclear whether (white) audiences laugh because politicians are being held to account, or because Black people are being ridiculed (*ibid.*: 524).

As I sought to demonstrate in this article, over the same period, a proliferation of popular humour has occurred in rural villages such as Impalahoek. But there is a

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difference in orientation. Whereas stand-up comedians comment about national transformations, punch up and mock the pretences of the country's elite (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]; Kuipers 2006), the humour of villagers concerns social relations in local settings. In an era of failed expectations, popular humour aims to construct interpersonal trust and mutuality.

Villagers have redeployed the traditional joking relationships to reinforce strained kinship networks. From the perspective of young people, improvised joking with grandparents, mothers, mother's brothers, siblings, cross-cousins and sexual partners has intensified and become more symmetrical. The general rule that one can joke only with people who one can see naked reinforces the connection between joking and intimacy (see Beidelman 1968). Joking also provides an avenue to express criticism and admonish displays of stupidity, drunkenness and unacceptable sexual conduct.

The more recent practice of (re)telling standard jokes operates within a different set of relations in a slightly different manner. People generally shared standard jokes with same-sex peers, and even with relative strangers such as visiting anthropologists, who might take offence at the kind of disrespect expressed in formal joking relations. Because the butt of these jokes was a fictitious third party and not necessarily a real person, the listener was insulated from direct embarrassment and the speaker from retaliation. Here, nakedness is not a precondition for joking, but rather a plot point: laughter was provoked by seeing prohibited categories of people in a state of undress. Standard jokes, too, castigate rape, stupidity, addiction to alcohol and the inability to assert dominance in encounters with women sex workers and Mozambican migrants. Nonetheless, the jokes can also be read as a general commentary about the diminished status of men in a precarious post-industrial economy, in which men are less likely to be in secure employment, marry and establish themselves as authoritative household heads. This is formulated most dramatically in jokes about penis loss, which poke fun at men's loss of their last shreds of masculinity. Black's (2012) and Livingston's (2012) respective studies of persons living with HIV in Zululand and cancer patients in Botswana illuminate the logic of such humour. They argue that jokes about decomposing bodies socialize the isolating aspects of pain and re-establish community in moments of distress. To the extent that laughter trivializes pain, they suggest, it constitutes a form of auto-palliation.

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Isak Niehaus teaches social anthropology at Brunel University of London. He has done extensive fieldwork in South African rural areas on topics such as witchcraft beliefs and accusations, masculinity, HIV and AIDS. His most recent monograph is *Radcliffe-Brown: journeys through colonial worlds, 1891–1995* (Berghahn Books, 2024).

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