

The Poetics of Joking Relationships among the Borana Clans, Kenya

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Abstract

Joking relationships have always been studied as a social phenomenon with a view to explicating their nature and function in societies they occur. Rarely have scholars interrogated the poetry and the performance of this genre and the attendant poetic nuances with which the jokes are narrated. This paper attempts to bring together these two strands of scholarships by investigating the nature of clan joke among the Borana and the poetic imagination in which it was inscribed. Some Borana clans have a certain reverential bond that unites them under what is called *sunsuma* (literally, hearthstone). They accord mutual respect and politeness to one another and avoid conflict by all means. Yet there are other clans whose relationships are marked by mock antagonism, banter and terse criticisms. It is amongst these latter clans that sophisticated jokes are composed and performed. The clan joke encompasses elements of contest, competition, and aggressiveness. They are manifest through oral performances that are indicative of social engagements, defining a web of social relationships through disparate genres like poetry, narrative, satire and joke. The joking partner clans thematise unconventional marriages, greed, deformity, sexual perversion and inadequacy amongst its members and taunt their antagonistic clans with them. The paper concludes that clan joke, serves as a forum for taking stock of compliance with a generally accepted community's code of conduct where nonconformity is ridiculed and subjected to sharp criticisms. It also provides a platform for performance of songs and poetry that are rich in eloquent metaphors and imagery as an integral part of a living oral tradition of this community.

Keywords Joking relationships, clan joke, oral poetry, Borana clans, poetics, oral genre.

1. Introduction

On December 30, 2001, in a remote rural town of Sololo in northern Kenya near the border with Ethiopia, where I was carrying out my fieldwork for a doctoral project, something spectacular that is of prime interest to me in this paper occurred. There, a Karayu clan among the Borana was meeting on an issue that had been highly politicized. Top on the agenda was that the then area Member of Parliament Dr. Guracha Galgalo had been accused of neglecting clan members at home (Sololo) and in the country's capital, Nairobi. The matter was brought to the attention of the elders by the Karayu clan members working in Nairobi and other Kenyan towns. The town was abuzz with discussion made louder by new faces arriving from the city for the meeting. The political temperature was high. The MP in effect had to defend his job that was due to be contested in Kenya's 2002 general elections barely twelve months away then. As the matter was being deliberated, the area Councilor one Jarso Jillo, who was also from a Digallu clan with institutionalized joking relationship with the Karayu clan came to the meeting and performed a poem cast within the convention of a jocular genre called *qoosa*¹ rich in metaphorical allusions and suggestive political implications. The interesting thing is that this was the first time the genre has been used as a direct intervention in modern parliamentary politics.

Immediately he was within earshot of the seated two hundred-plus Karayu clan members with its mixture of the young and the old, the educated and the illiterate, the high and mighty, and the ordinary, the jovial councilor greeted them with a formulaic call, *Karayu d'inte d'inna? Karayu d'inte d'inna?* The import of this cannot be adequately captured in translation, but it is close to something like, "Karayu clan are you ready for me?" The gathering answered in unison, *oobai*, "come out with it", indicating their readiness to play along with him. Having been granted his request, he recited the following text:

¹ A word that denotes literally joke-play, that describes a field of meaning that are associated with humour. Ton Leus in his *Borana Dictionary* (1995) translate *qoosa* as, to joke, make fun of, mock, having a joking relation. In this paper I translate the word as joke but the reader should not lose sight of its richness as intended by the Borana in its original version.

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Jaarumaa Guracha | The leadership of Guracha |
| Didimtun d'ibsaate | Didimtu viewd a problem |
| Garuule iyaane | They did not go far |
| D'anqan Didimtuti irkaate | D'anqa allied with Didimtu |
| Amenaale inqabdi | They are also discontented |
| Beeree Tiiselen | Beere andTiseele |
| Chiqileet jibsate, | Leaned on their elbows |
| Ameena qortee hinbamne | They did not solve the case |
| Sibaaf Ittuleen | Siba and Ittu |
| Ak d'ad'a hibsate | Smearred it like oil |
| Ajeejin awechaa Ajeeji | The talkative ones |
| Ooroo mii jifate | Are like a camel whose load has come off |
| Eenti itidebisa? | Who will reload it? |

This was followed by raucous laughter and an invitation for the man to repeat his poem, which he did a few more times. From then on, the poem was on everyone's lips. Verbal forms lend themselves to verbal exegesis—are intended and expected to be talked about, to be explained, expounded, and opened up so that the multiple meanings enclosed in them are revealed (Barber 1991:3). Thus people memorized the poem, interpreted it and retold it to others, corrected one another, quoted and generally used it as an entry point in the discussions of the prevailing political alignments. The speaker was invited for lunch and congratulated for his creative joke.

What, then, is this discourse about and what is its significance and place in the Borana society? Every text, like every utterance, bears the marks of its orientation towards an addressee, revealing an expectation of being interpreted (Barber 1999:27). In terms of immediate context, an elected councilor was making an attempt to rescue his beleaguered political colleague whose job was on the line by negotiating a softer option for him couched in traditional conventions of joking relationships. The speaker underscores the political dissents of the larger sections of the Karayu clan lead by Didimtu, and followed by others notably D'anqa, Beeree, and Tiseele; while others like Siiba and Ittu, unable to mediate between the dissenting subclans and the MP, assumed an attitude of resigned indifference. In this type of scenario, the speaker concludes that the Ajeeji subclan from which the MP hailed, can only be likened to a camel whose load has loosened and threatens to fall, and is therefore badly in need of a loader. The rhetorical question is put in such a way that the Karayu clan rises up to the occasion and asserts itself as the loader who will saddle the metaphorical camel, meaning campaign and vote for the MP.

At a more covert level, if one applies Clifford Geertz's (1975) notion, culture is an ensemble of texts that can be read off. The entire discourse is rich with its fluidity and integration of the often polarized and differentiated matrixes of rural/urban, modern/tradition, and humour/serious whose boundaries are crossed and transgressed at different junctures of the social event. Paradoxically, the youngsters from the urban centers called to service the expertise of the tradition and its institution of conflict resolution. Even more important is the unspoken but shared knowledge between the speaker and his audience that is so crucial to the interpretation of this text, one of the essential features of joke exchanges. What is pertinent is that the speaker had engaged himself in the performance of a traditional art form by composing a text that spoke to the moment at hand. As Madison and Hamera tell us, performance has evolved into ways comprehending how human beings fundamentally make culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world (2006). The text alludes to the political history of the constituency, and by invoking the Didimtu discontent from the onset, the speaker reminds us of the fact that the sub-clan mentioned had had a Member of Parliament from their sub-clan a decade before who was dislodged in the 1992 general elections. The notable thing is that the text depended so much on things that are outside it for effective interpretation. The nature of joke as with that of *oriki*, noted by Karin Barber is compact, allusive, and fragmented, and hence needs to be supplemented by the hearer from narrative resources outside the text itself (1991: 27).

Another question to consider is why people laughed, or put another way, what kind of laughter did the jocular oral poem elicit and why? As Elizabeth Holt (2011) tells us, laughter is not just a reaction to a prior turn, it is an action in itself that appreciates the prior, treats it as laugh-relevant and contribute to a particular action sequence inherent

within the prior turn (such as moving towards topic closure). Firstly, the convention of joke framed and marked by the formulaic utterance and the audience's prior knowledge of the performer's clan, made the audience anticipate a performance (Bauman 1975:298) that is essentially humorous. Secondly, as my informants put it, the poem in terms of its content was a depiction of truth, and in the Borana proverbial lore, truth brings about laughter. Wilson (2006) construes joke as a pretence in which the speaker makes as if to perform a certain speech act, expecting her audience to see through the pretence and recognize the mocking or critical attitude behind it. Thirdly, the beauty of the oral poem lay in the language repertoire that was used and people laughed for the sheer entertainment it provided. Through his performance of the oral genre, the councilor provided an interlude that served to relieve tension and from then on people chatted freely, for he had indeed humorously hinted at the problem the MP faced, and in the same breathe asked for reconciliation and pardon for the man. What this shows, is that there are different ways of using and configuring humour. Joke as a genre is an expressive form with which people can mediate diverse and sometimes conflicting parts of their experience and their identities as Gunner & Gwala (1991:29), suggest in connection with Zulu *izibongo* which comment on individuals' experiences of interpersonal relationships.

The Borana clans have special relationships either of joking or avoidance. This phenomenon is common in most African societies (Moreu 1944, Colson 1962, Christensen 1963). Christensen for example espouses that joking is an indicator of privileged familiarity and basing his opinion on the joking relationship among the Luguru, concludes that the greatest degree of joking is carried on between *watani* of the same generation, and cross-sexual joking is common with obscene suggestive language and horse play. This is how he puts it:

A man may jokingly grab a woman's cloth and attempts to disrobe her. A woman may deride a *mtani* about his lack of sexual prowess, and imply that he is sterile or impotent. He may respond with an invitation to accompany him in order to demonstrate his virility (Christensen 1963:1316).

The convention of the genre turns otherwise hostile actions and claims to be construed as a joke about which none should take offense. Commenting on reciprocal clan relationships among the Bemba of the then Northern Rhodesia, Richards (1937) observes that they teased one another at funerals by making irritating jokes, while at the same time they helped in funeral purification rites. She reports, for instance, that a member of the Crocodile clan will scoff at the one of Fish people and deride him, "you are just my good ration". Furthermore, she contends that it is common to hear jokes between men and women in the *munugwe* (joking) relationship to shout to one another, "come here, you are my enemy, you are my wife" (1937:191). The social action of the joking partner clans are mediated by institutionalized relationships that operate to redirect the joke at a solemn time to be understood as a joke rather than an offense within the generic convention of joking partner clans.

The agonistic element of joke in general has long been observed as a universal feature (Kanaana 1990). Clan joke among the Borana is an utterance that addresses a joking partner clan, an action that anticipates and elicits a response. In some of the texts as we shall see below, the responses are direct comments on the abusiveness of the preceding text, such as, "you touched [hurt] our clan, and I will touch on your clan". It is as if the response creates a framing text, one that according to Bakhtin (1986:103) is imbued with the capacity to comment, evaluate and object. This social engagement is more than what Kennedy (1970:52) has called a form of play which provides entertainment. Clan joke among the Borana is a licentious engagement in which the occasion and the social convention permits the performer the space to freely perform his jocular poetry. Abrahams (1970:290) recommends the investigation of what limits there are to the license given by the community and by the individuals involved even though the generic convention is clear about the extent to which it grants allowance to joking partners. As Stevens (1978:69) comments, the degree of license exhibited is a manifestation of the nature of the relationship, where a man's jokers are also his moral censors. By the same token, severest clan criticisms are normally from those who share the joking relationships. In addition to its effective role as terse criticisms, clan joke is valued for its aesthetics, what Yankah has called the narrative that pleases the ear, as people are sensitive to discourse animation (1995:107). In what follows, I pay attention to the underpinning genre convention of clan joke and examine its poetic and performative nature.

2. The Borana Clan System and the Social Contexts of Joking Relationships

Divided into two moieties, *Sabo* and *Gona*, every individual Borana is a member of a certain clan that is ascribed at birth. The moieties are also divided into seventeen clans of which three are *Sabo* and the rest are *Gona*. These are further branched into sub-clans known as *maana* (house) and *balballa* (doors). The origin of this division may not be clear, perhaps not even important aside from its organizational value. It nonetheless has far-reaching implications for their social, political, and religious lives. Ideally marriage is exogamous, in that a *Sabo* can only marry from *Gona* and vice versa. The clan structures play an important role in the social and cultural life of the people to the point of dictating how an individual should behave towards another individual or group. This culturally mediated behaviour is done through *qoosa* (joke) or *sunsuma* also known as *wayyuu* (avoidance), where the former denotes institutionalized joking, the latter calls for institutionalized avoidance. There are clearly defined observances of clan and sub-clan alliances and antagonisms that are played out at various times in the life of the community.

Clansmen are obliged to help one another in lean times to redistribute wealth in form of livestock for the afflicted. Clan elders who command sufficient moral authority oversee the implementation of this system to strengthen the solidarity and social ties. Although clanship is a social construct, it is religiously executed of which the kinship names they use to refer to each other such as "mother", "brother", "father" and "sister" is illustrative. As Legesse writes, a man of *Sabo* moiety must avoid all forms of sexual intimacy with *Sabo* woman because they are said to be his "sister", and he must ascertain how he should relate to her immediately by establishing her moiety affiliation (1973). The clan regulates matters of sex, marriage and sharing of property because it is the bedrock of social organization. Deviation from this norm draws sharp criticisms through joke and in daily talks, and in some cases the culprits suffer stiff penalties of exclusion from some crucial rituals of social importance. But this neat idealism is flouted from time to time thus threatening the authority of traditional structures. Cases of members of the same clan engaging in marriages are on the rise, as modernity erodes the age-old organizational principle of clan system. Clan joke indicts this emerging practice that violates the community's own notions of morality.

Oromo literature (of which the Borana is part) is rich in folktales, stories, songs and poems and is passed from one generation to another by elders (Hassen 2010). In the oral performances of clan joke, an element of obscenity comes to the fore. Obscene or dirty-jokes as they are generally known have been regarded in the literature as a means for individuals to deal with their own repression (Fine 1976, Legman 1968). In his *Rationale for Dirty Jokes*, Legman, for instance, argues that under the mask of humour, society allows infinite aggressions where the teller of the joke betrays hidden hostility and signals victory over the butt. He contends "the telling of dirty joke serves in its simplest form as a sort of vocal and inescapable sexual relationship with another person of the desired sex" (1968:13). This view assumes that male speakers essentially direct the joke at the female rather than the male butt. This is as one might expect is one-sided, for in the case of joke among the Borana clans, we are dealing with obscene joke aggression at the expense of male joking partners. In the main, most of the clan joke performances discussed here criticize the indulgence in socially disapproved activities and thus serve as a means to assert moral authority over the butts. In fact in view of clan joke's perpetual call for and enforcement of a collective norm, they could be regarded as social satire aimed at correcting the social deviants by subjecting them to biting humour. In so far as this humour is institutionalized within the mainstream Borana culture, they serve as a mirror for the individual clan to discover what is laughable about themselves. However it must be borne in mind that the modus operandi of the clan joke is without doubt humour, or to put it in the local expression, "play". Often the content of these songs comment, defend and conserve societal norms, social behavior and moral values of the community at large (Ryanga 2011).

The paired joking partner clans as Radcliffe-Brown (1940) puts it are expected, even obliged, to joke with each other without any offence being taken. For Radcliffe-Brown, institutionalized joking relationship is one special form of alliance as it prevents conflict by keeping the parties conjoined (1949:133). My inquiry into why this institutionalized joking occurred among the Borana clans reveals interesting paradoxical answers couched in locally nuanced implications. On the one hand, informants contend that the joking partner is *sunsuma* (revered) to whom one does not utter falsehoods but on the contrary treats with awe, and on the other, he is one with whom one could interact freely. Clan joke consequently rests on ambivalent ground where awe and free interaction are equally prevalent. Humour acts as a double-edged sword being used for collaboration and inclusion and collusion and exclusion (Rogers-Revell 2007). According to one informant, Koroma Wario, "the joke exchanging clans dare not charge others with false accusation for such a liar would die". The reason for playing joke is that it wards off would-be catastrophe, "*abraat baa*". This latter loaded term whose meaning cannot be captured wholly in translation,

suggests that calamitous events are avoided by mentioning them, by mocking them as if they really happened. The joke plays on the culturally coded but shared knowledge common to the joke-sending clan and the joke-receiving one. These joking relationships are configured in a number of ways. One of these is name-calling. In normal daily conversations, ill-omen is usually attributed to the joking partner clans. Women are often heard swearing, "*udhu dubr Digallu*" (the buttocks of the daughters of *Digallu* clan), for example, when startled by some unanticipated event. The speaker is from Karayu clan and the two have mutually accepted joking relationships. The *Digallu* girls can utter the same about Karayu and so forth, depending on one's joking partner clan. These apparent hostilities are based on familiarity and in the opinion of Boru Guyo, a Borana informant, "it is done for purposes of humour because participants love each other, as ordained by god". Yet the notion of love comes into doubt when one considers the foibles of one family or individual mapped onto the whole clan by magnifying and generalizing it in pluralistic terms. This kind of projection is a feature of clan joke, for the clan is always addressed as a corporate group of people whose acts are generalized, as evinced in the employment of the plural form in reference to them.

What is more, the joking partner clans frequently accuse one another of evil eye (*budha*) and the consumption of tabooed animals such as tortoise, porcupine, and warhog. They also refer to one another by the nickname of Waata, a hunter-gatherer community living on the fringe of Borana community. Invariably, the Waata consume the flesh of the animals mentioned above, and thus the consumption and the essential identity are linked directly. In this, we see the attributes of contamination pinned onto the clan with which joking is shared. This pinning of labels implying impurity on rival clans has also been observed in other ethnographic studies (Stefaniszn 1950, Douglas 1966, Rigby 1968, Freedman 1977). Freedman, for example, refers to it as artful insulting and sets out to investigate the element of the interaction that turns a literal insult into a symbolic gesture of friendship. He concludes that the Kiga of Rwanda invest in each clan ritual powers over procreation and activate them with the exchange of services and manipulation of a limited number of sacred symbols of which clan joking is a part.

3. Clan Joke at Naming Ceremonies

The joking partner clans compose elaborate joke for one another in the form of songs sung at naming ceremonies. These performers deal with diverse themes ranging from comments on leadership weaknesses, neglect of clan members, to inappropriate sexual liaisons, among others. As Bakhtin tells us, during such ceremonial occasions that he calls the time of carnival, life is subject to its own laws, the laws of its own freedom, and in his words "it is a time of revival and renewal vividly felt as an escape from the official way of life" (1968:7). This escape from officialdom manifests itself in "suspension of all hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (1968:10). The clan joke on this occasion closely resembles Bakhtin's category of folk humour that relies on a special type of communication that is gay, triumphant and at the same time, mocking. The notion of tampering the biting criticism engendered in joke with words and gestures to neutralize the offensive effect of joke has been noted by scholars. Referring to a study in China, Alles (2003) notes "in joking relationships the man who pauses the insulting expressions will pass his hands across his face or back of his neck and then let his arm suddenly fall". Because they employ bawdy and humiliating language on such occasion, the jesters in the Borana case use formulaic language to preface their performances with lengthy apologies and disclaimers for what they were going to say. The formula often employed goes this way:

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Waari d'inte d'inna | The people we are challenging |
| Obai ma hinjene | Why don't they say ready |
| Waari harma hinjire | They are absent |
| Hawadi fakate | It (joke performance) appears backbiting |
| Waari kono ch'isaa | They are present |
| Malfano fakate | It appears bullying |
| Nu malfano hinjene | We are not uttering this for the sake of bullying |
| Aada jillaa jene | We are uttering this as the custom of the ceremony dictates |

The clan joke is thus framed in the terms that clearly spell out what it is and what it is not. It is not a speech that is said to the people who are absent, for the nature of the speech is such that it is too critical of the people it addresses

and it is only fair that the allegation is heard, and if possible countered. Neither is it uttered as a speech to bully a people who are defenseless, though the terseness of the criticism makes it appear so. Rather, the clan joke is rendered as naming ceremonial convention demands, for which none should take offense. As Parkin avers, joking is characteristically ritualized and takes place especially on ritual occasions between well-defined groups and not purely between individuals (1993: 261).

The occasion is one where people celebrate their lives by coming together and recounting their past histories and present lives, bringing them within the purview of present reality for observation, evaluation and emulation. The last line above, "as the custom of the ceremony dictates", alludes to this permissive recounting and reassessment of the community's life as a whole. The challenged group on its part also replies in a formulaic fashion:

| | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Waari d'inte d'inna | The people who challenged us |
| Obai nunjed'e | Asked us to be ready |
| Obati fud'ane | We accept the challenge |
| Aada jillaa jene | It is the dictate of the ceremony |
| Nuu waran wal jala | We are friends with them |
| Waran wal jalana | We like them dearly |
| Ola wal godana | We live in the same village with them |
| Wanjenu hinwalalu | We are not in short of what to say |
| Offolen nu nyaati sodana | We fear they will eat us |

The performers in the above oral poem accept the challenge and assert not only their readiness but also their fears. The preface should indeed be perceived as containing some of the most crucial codes of the clan joke. First, like all challenges, it contains elements of antagonism that must be answered. Second, the response that comes with the challenge has a way of eroding the friendship between the participants. Hence the speaker, acutely aware of this, finds it imperative to restate and confirm the existence of the friendship and neighborliness that should not be jeopardized by the exigencies of the present antagonizing performance. Third, in answering the challenges posed, it is not that the contestants are short of words, as they make it clear. The truth is that they are cautious of the dangers frankness will bring with itself in a situation where painful revelation of personal or family foibles are brought to the public arena. Startled by such a revelation, the affected individual is feared to cause harm to the utterer in a way that needs some explanation². What the formulaic expression does is to lessen the effect of these dangers by psychologically preparing the participants for what is to come. Thus these formulaic utterances having been exchanged, everybody is covered as whatever is said acquires the legitimacy and license of the naming ceremony. It forestalls offence and danger by locating it within the general framework of joke and ritual, two genres that permit people to engage in extraordinary verbal activities without any reprisal.

4. Thematic Concerns of Clan Joke

Unconventional marriages such as those outside the Borana community, for instance, invite adverse comments from critical rival clans who are quick to notice the anomaly as soon as it happens. One jester, Boru Guyo of Warjida clan, creates a joke about a family from Sirayu clan whose two daughters were married in Tanzania in this way:

| | |
|---------------------|------------------------|
| Haren harre d'alte | Donkey begets donkey |
| Gange fardon d'alte | Horse begets mule |
| Haricho Karayu | Haricho Karayu |
| Ato Batin d'alte | Mother Bati begets him |
| Haricho sodate | She feared Haricho, |
| Jalla Orgen baade | Orge his wife ran away |

² The Borana believe that elderly people and certain clans are endowed with supernatural powers. If such persons were slighted, the offenders would be hurt. The Digallu clan and the *Waar Kurakorme* subclans of Karayu are especially known for their *gaar* (supernatural powers). One way in which malevolence would befall an individual, it is believed, is that he would lose his speech ability or worse still he could die rather suddenly.

Halkum Kenyaa d'abde
Ilman Iya Ganya
Walum yamate
Ch'ufti Tanzaniat baade

They lacked marriage partners in Kenya
The daughters of Iya Ganya
Beckoned each other
And disappeared to Tanzania

Two families with different marital problems are made subjects of the joke. In the first case, a man named Haricho had the misfortune of his wife running away because it was said that she feared him. The jester makes fun of the butt by employing the imagery of the donkey that in the culture is regarded as stubborn, and an ungrateful beast. The second family is that of Iya Ganya whose daughters are said to have crossed international borders in search of husbands. The joke critiques the action against the backdrop of the society's perception of girls who are not supposed to give themselves away as willing partners in marriage, let alone search for one.

As regards style, the joke was constructed from words with similar sounds, *harre* and the punning word *haricho* in the first two lines. The ending of most of the lines relies on words that sound alike, *d'alte/baade/d'abde*. The words are crucial not only at the sound and rhythmic levels but also in terms of content as they carry the import of the main issues raised. *D'alte* denotes 'beget', *baade* means 'disappear' and *d'abde* implies 'missed'. The three words aptly capture the birth, disappearance and loss, vital as themes of the joke. The one born into the community disappears and is alienated not just physically by going to Tanzania but also culturally by getting married to alien men.

Like inappropriate clan marriages, greed and ugliness are themes that are common in the clan jokes. In the text below a man of Karayu clan Diid Huqa Gila is described as greedy because of his incessant day and night roving:

Waaqi dumans guure
Wan roobu fakata
Fuuli Koote Sora
Wan boou fakata
Alkani guya deemaa
Didi Huqa Gila
Sabdi nut fakatee

The cloud gathered
It appears to rain
The face of Koote Sora
Appears to cry
He roves day and night
Diid Huqa Gila
He appears greedy to us

Here, the jester is making fun of two clan members, one for being ugly and the other for being greedy. The speaker describes Koote Sora's face as being contorted by ugliness and therefore looks like it is about to weep. As for Diid Huqa Gila, his frequency of going to other people's homes at meal times brings the oddity of his habits to the verge of greed on which the jester comments. The joke is rhythmically balanced with near symmetrical halves. The words *roobu* (rain) and *boou* (cry) also aid in creating a sound pattern essential for memory and ease of utterance.

Clan joke, for the most part is a vehicle for humour, drawing on physical infirmities and habitual misdemeanors of butts. As Glenn (2003) tells us laughter contributes to sequence of conversational intimacy and play. Tallness or shortness as physical attributes are also linked with other social attributes and increasingly elicit comments at the expense of the butt. The following lines uttered by Kusi Diba are telling:

Goobo gaala qaba
D'eran ak gaala
Sarite ka Guraa
Bobbaa darro qaba
Dakko Boru Adi
Fulli guba qabaa

That with a hump, he owns a camel
The tall one like camel
Sarite son of Guraa
Has a gourd under his arm
Dakko Boru Adi
His face has brand

In this text, two people are linked together and made butts of the joke encapsulated in a series of humorous references. The tallness of Sarite Guraa is given in terms that liken him to a camel, an animal whose disproportionate tallness marks it out as an epitome of ugliness. Even the gourd that he is said to have tucked under his arm is from an

ugly roughly carved wood usually associated with the camel herders such as the Gaari and Gabra³. The final line shifts its jocular attention to another man Dakko Boru Adi, who seems to have had facial marks and it is this that forms the basis of the jocular aggression. Facial branding is perceived as a form of deformity and often become an object of attack by the jesters. These types of marks are normally acquired in childhood as a kind of testimony in remedial antidote to some infliction or other. Common among these inflictions that leave their victims with scars are smallpox, chickenpox, and measles for which the Borana did not have the privilege of vaccines. Deformities such as blindness, like the facial brand, become subjects of clan joke. Chiaro contends that a joke at the expense of physically handicapped appeal to the feeling of repressed sadism (1992:8), and for Bergson, a deformity that may become comic is that which a normally built person could successfully imitate (1911:23). A performer, Kusi Diba contends:

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Had'a Kanda Garbiti | The mother of Kanda Garbiti |
| Mataan lam tahe | Her head was paired |
| Had'a Sanda diqo | The mother of Sanda |
| Ilat bala tahe | Her eyes became blind |
| Jarti Boru Waaqo | The wife of Boru Waaqo |
| Mataan moyye tahe | Her hair was sparse |
| Dibate hinbufane | He did not shave in <i>gada</i> ceremony |
| Adate hinagare | We have not seen him shave normally |
| Matan Boru Waaqo | The head of Boru Waaqo, |
| Manin moyye tahe? | Why has it become bare? |

The first two lines intimate the seeming double headedness of a protagonist. The jester describes one family, displaying a range of their deformities. The blindness joked about is usually a partial one of a mono-eyed person so that even as the jesters mix pleasure with pain, some element of sympathy is reserved for the deformed person. Yet there is no denying that the person is a representation of an inferior figure with respect to the jester, and therefore a ready recipe for humour. In the above joke, the last six lines focus on the lack of hair on the head of both the wife and her husband, thus the reason to portray them as objects of aggressive humour. The jester heightens the surprise element by employing a stance in which he wonders aloud how the head of the butt has become bare. To achieve humour and establish the anomaly of the bare head, he calls to service the normative cultural practice that explains the bareness of male head. The first is in the accomplishment of *gada* rituals at which people in certain stage of *gada* cycle relinquish their leadership roles in a ceremony where head shaving symbolically marks its closure. The jester makes it starkly explicit that the butt did not undergo this ceremony that would have served an understandable reason for his bare head.

Neither has he been seen shaving in the normal way, the second excusable reason for the bareness of the head. The jester draws pleasure from the deformities that beset that family, portraying them as symbols of ugliness. As Goldstein (1976:109) points out, laughter at derogatory joke about one's group may be a means of indicating that the jokes deal with a subclass of the group's members from whom they want to distance themselves.

Often linked and the person made object of humour in this way are physical impairment, poverty and being orphaned. The text below describes a man, Sora Otoba, as an orphan who lives in the house of poverty:

| | |
|------------------|---------------------------------|
| Dakko Boru Adi | The face of Dakko Boru Adi |
| Fulli guba qaba | Is branded |
| Iyesi waara | Their orphaned son |
| Sora ka Otoba | Sora son of Otoba |
| Maan iyuma qaba | He has the house of poverty |
| Aban Tanu Buke | The father of Tanu Buke |
| Jarti bala qaba | Is married to a blind old woman |
| Nado balan waara | Their blind elder Nado |

³ These are Somali-related nomadic camel herders. They are notorious for carrying huge gourds that the Borana derogatorily call *darro* as they traverse the plains.

Nadon isan gartan
Maf himama qaba?

This Nado you see
Why does he wear checkered turban?

The astonishing thing with the joke at the expense of orphan is that in normal life, being orphaned evokes empathy rather than antipathy. The joke at the expense of the orphan, it appears is part of the same trend of anomalous indulgence into which the joke carries its participants. In addition to the freedom that goes with joke performance in general, the need to outdo the other clan with which one is joking makes demands on the jester, thus forcing him to violate the codes of his sympathetic reasoning which would have deterred him from making a joke from the pains of members of their community. As Freud avers, joke affords us the means of surmounting restrictions and opens up otherwise inaccessible pleasure source (1916:150). Although other characteristics are joked about in the text below, the eye is the one targeted:

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Harroo Halakee Sanqee | The catchments for the water pan of Halake Sanqee |
| Galchaa diid keete | They placed it in the open |
| Errega har Halakee | The management of the waterman of Halake |
| Kaaruu afaan keete | They put Kaaruu in charge |
| Afaan Diid Jillo | The mouth of Diid Jillo |
| Gayaa keesa keete | They put cigarette in it |
| Jaldesa Molu | Jaldesa Molu |
| D'iibu Waata keete | They put in the bedroom of Waata |
| Maanti achi gaad d'iba | What is pushing it from there, |
| Ilti Molu Moyo | The eyes of Molu Moyo |
| Fiite koola teete? | Sit on the eyelid? |

In this joke we notice the use of the plural 'they' as a way of referring to the clan. The actions are all performed by the clan in the perception of the speaker, even when it is the individuals who have done so in their private capacity. This is one of the ways in which clan joke is marked that is, the attribution of individual follies to the entire clan and critiquing them as the weaknesses of the many. The lines make fun of three persons and of course with them the entire clan. These are, Diid Jillo for smoking, Jaldesa Molu for consorting with Waata women and Molu Moyo whose eyes are bulging out in a deformed way. Far removed incidents are brought together through sound pattern, where the ending of one line provides the beginning of another, as in the word *afaan*/mouth of the water pan provides the beginner for the next line *afaan*/mouth of a person who smokes. This kind of linking device where the final element of one line is converted into the initial element of the next line has been observed in other oral compositions in other cultures (Lord 1960, Andrzejewski & Lewis 1964). For the Borana songs, jests and poetry, it remains the most pervasive style used to connect ideas. The repetition of *galcha*/catchment, *afaan*/mouth, and *Molu* in the various lines of the text serves as a connective of the various disparate elements in the text. What makes this jest interesting is the claims by the jester that the clan was engaged in doing things that people do themselves, such as smoking or consorting with women considered from socially impure communities such as the Waata in a sort of deliberate way. It is these deliberate actions that are imputed to the clans that are laughed at.

A joke reflects social attitudes and provides a vehicle through which people can voice feelings for which there is no socially acceptable or easily accessible outlet (Winnick 1976:124). Accordingly, one of the most central themes of clan joke is that it records and critiques sexual inappropriateness among members. Most common of these improprieties are impotence, incest, homosexuality and zoophily, and it would be beneficial to look at each of them in turn. But suffice it to state from the onset that an explicit engagement with these tabooed themes is primarily a manifestation of negotiation of the prohibited and the suppressed, that which social convention has denied entry into the domain of the discursive regime. A performer, Mr. Ajaa Gufu, captures sexual inadequacy of a man in this way:

Halake isani
Barochu odesa

Their Halake
Talks of the bellows of bulls

| | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Didi mand'a wara | Didi their younger brother |
| Falan gogesa | Is lean as a stick |
| D'enge chimpe hinqamne | That D'enge is impotent |
| Rufot nut odesa | Rufo narrated to us |

The joke underlines the character traits of three brothers. The first is infatuated with cattle and preoccupies himself with talking about the way bulls bellow. The younger brother is negatively portrayed as lean as a stick. But the climax, to which the preceding lines are merely a buildup, is the revelation of the impotency of the one called D'enge. This is done in a conspiratorial tone where Rufo, the wife of the butt is shown as an accomplice in divulging the damaging information. The jester implicates her to authenticate his claim, a strategy that alienates the butt and denies him the public's sympathy.

Unlike D'enge in the above text who is charged with impotence, sexual perversion is the subject of criticism below. A man, Ch'ach'ole Boru is implicitly referred to as one who engages in copulation with female donkeys:

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Qorati sodati | For fear of thorn, |
| Aalo jal hinbatu | They pass not under <i>aalo</i> tree |
| Aliya sodati | For fear of gorge |
| Afaan lagaa hinbatu | They pass not at the river mouth |
| Ch'ach'ole ka Bore | Ch'ach'ole son of Boru |
| Hareen hinsodati | Donkeys fear him |
| Moga wara hinbaatu | They do not go to his residence |

Lines 1-4 set the scene which culminates in the last three lines underscoring the man's tendentious affection for donkeys as a result of which they now dread visiting his residence. Such indulgences in zoophilia, by all counts belong to the domain of immorality. Borana customary law (*seera*) has punitive provision for those who copulate with animals. The law against copulation with the domestic animals such as the donkey, cattle, goats and the like is however at variance, with the one on cattle carrying the severest penalty and that of the donkey the lightest. These variations throw light on the local classification of these animals, which is primarily based on whether they and their products are consumed. In this hierarchy, cattle are rated highly and strong regulations against copulating with them are expressively meant to protect them from desecration. Legman (1968) suggests the cow's paramount motherliness as milk-giver fortifies it against bestiality. He points out that in Europe it is the sheep that is usually the target of zoophilic jokes. Boru however, explains that the joke about copulating with the donkey, with which he prods his rival clan, is based on likelihood and is therefore not necessarily factual. He narrates an incident in which his rival clan member stumbled over a donkey in the dark at night. The beast, true to its nature kicked him so viciously that he fell with a thud a few meters away. Having learnt of the incident later, he made a joke that the man had in fact intended to copulate with the donkey and was rebuffed with a disastrous kick.

If joke arises from incidents like the preceding anecdote, it then begs the question of the place of truth/falsehood regarding the clans that exchange jokes. As earlier stated the answer is ambivalent, which perhaps is the genre's way of defying definitive categorization. Such ambivalence has also been observed elsewhere (Oring 1973). In his discussion of *chizbat*-a body of jokes, anecdotes and tall tales, among the Jews, Oring points out that, informants repeatedly suggest *chizbat* contained some kind of truth, despite the fact that the word's literal meaning is "lies":

It doesn't have to be all right, but it is not all wrong. It is a story that happened but with a little bit imagination. But the imagination in this case is to make the story a little better, not to change the story. *Chizbat* is part true, part false and is humorous (360).

Joke among the Borana clans, like *chizbat* above, concerns real characters and situations embellished at either the content or formal levels. In general it is safe to assume that clan joke contains the elements of truth and fiction in varying degrees.

Like bestiality, homosexuality too, is a common theme in clan joke, a phenomenon already underscored elsewhere in the category of sexual jokes (Fine 1976, Chapman & Gadfield 1976). The following text is clear about the occurrence of homosexuality among the Borana that chides the clan from which the person who indulges in the practice hails:

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Waari kenna Basso | Our clans are <i>Basso</i> |
| Waani keesan baasa | Your deeds are strange |
| Wan keesan gad baasa | I shall reveal your deeds |
| Kotobo Qandoye | Kotobo Qandoye |
| Janjamo Qaloye | Janjamo Qaloye |
| Waari Qando Ruusa | The family of Qando Ruusa |
| Aad lafat rtiuse | They bend their forehead |
| Gurba Guyo Rero | The son of Guyo Rero |
| Udu d'ira ruuse (Kobla) | Stretches his buttocks to men (Prolonged laughter) |

Line 1 underscores the speaker's identity as coming from the *Basso* clans. The *Basso* clans are regarded as being vested with some ritual powers for which they are venerated and held in high esteem. For the speaker to assert his people are from the *Basso* clan, he underlines their importance within the cultural context of the Borana world. This is contrasted with the butt's social position, which through the use of words that sound alike (*basso*, *baasa*, *gad baasa*) is demeaned and exposed to ridicule. Line 2 thus underscores the oddity of the butt's clan, and in the line that follows, the jester asserts that he will expose the strangeness to which he has alluded. Lines 4-9 name the personalities in the butt's clan who engage in homosexuality. The names Kotobo Qandoye and Janjamo Qaloye are in themselves funny because they describe their owners' physical oddity. One is peculiarly short, diminutive, while the other is hefty, gigantic. The last two, Qandoye and Qaloye are funny at the level of sound. Lines 6-9 describe how "the people of Qando Ruusa place their foreheads on the ground and stretch their buttocks to men". Here the homosexual tendency of men which is regarded as a taboo subject is revealed and critiqued.

Incest as a theme is very common in the clan joke. It takes the form of the lusts fathers have for their daughters. The clan being a set of imaginary construct of social relations rather than biological ones, the prohibition of incest has both real and metaphorical aspects to it. Not cohabiting with the daughter of the clan is metaphorically synonymous to avoiding incestuous relationship with one's own daughter. Conversely avoiding older women the age of one's mother meant the prohibition of incest between mother and son. The following text is illustrative:

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Galan Waaso | To the Uaso Nyiro River |
| Godaante quubaate | They moved and settled |
| Gaalaata guudisa | The debt of nurturing |
| Duubra ira fuud'ate | They obtain from their daughters |
| Koop'e itbafaate | They remove their shoes |
| Afaa ityabate | They climb the bed to them |
| Intaal ufi d'alte | Their own daughters |
| Fulasa lalate | They search for penetration |
| Gaaraan d'aala baadu | The belly of birth being sympathetic |
| Waa jirtaa gaafaate | They inquire whether she has survived the thrust |

Lines 1-2 underscore the practice of shifting with cattle in search of pasture and here the Uaso Nyiro River is the targeted destination. It is common for people to move within the designated Borana area for the purposes of grazing their livestock. But the importance of these lines is that they herald the word for the second line, *gaalaata* (thanks) or read within the context of that line, "debt of nurture", on which the rest of the text is built. We see the subtle use of sarcasm here because the taking of the 'debt of nurture' is sarcastically given as the basis for incest. The same sarcasm is employed in the last line where after a brutal sexual penetration the victimizer is moved by the empathy of parenthood to inquire whether his victim has survived the sexual aggression. The aggression is heightened by the preceding grotesque and vivid description of how the sexual exploit was executed (lines 5-10).

5. Conclusion

This paper has problematised the poetics of clan jokes and interrogated some of its characteristics. Among the Borana, clan jests are performed on diverse occasions. Two such occasions, namely the political gatherings and naming ceremonies, were examined. Used thus the clan joke speaks to the addressee to take a position and endorse a candidate for political position or to look over their shoulders and amend the socially unconventional behaviors of its members. The community subscribes to certain moral codes, which embody their very notion of a united people. When this underlying sense of a people is threatened, humorous but biting comments are formulated not only for the individual deviant but also for the entire clan. This is done through elaborate poetry and performance that is aesthetically marked, artful, witty and humorous. The clan criticism on the whole serves as a crucial platform for fostering the generally accepted traditional codes by subjecting pervasive tendencies of deviation to public ridicule. Moral estrangement and the loss of human dignity are projected as real or imaginary vices that pose a threat to the value system of the community. Such perversions are strongly resisted through suppression of individual desires that tend to gravitate towards deviance. But even as society strives to maintain what it deems a viable order, where clan joke serves as its cultural mirror, tension simmers beneath the veneer of the very system. This is partly due to the contradiction within the system and partly to the modern day exigencies that make the community open to ideas and cultures from the wider world. Critically significant is the creative and artistic endeavors that performers indulge in to understand the world in which they live within the purview of social norms that define that world. Laughter and humour is created by the poetic devices used and the witty remarks made.

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