

Humour across cultures: an appetizer

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Abstract

Joking is universal behaviour. Jokes provide playful ways of addressing taboo subjects that relate to the basic drives of people for sexuality, affiliation, novelty and dominance. Telling jokes is a way to achieve status, which is more a male preoccupation than a female one. But aside from the gender difference, people do not make the same kinds of jokes across the world. There are differences both in the process of joking, in joke style, and in the content of jokes. Are jokes subtle or blunt, are they derogatory, what are the taboo subjects? These things vary. The article provides a *tour d'horizon* of cultural differences across the world. It does so using Hofstede's five basic issues of culture: collectivity, hierarchy, aggression, otherness, and need gratification. At the hand of examples, it shows that humour does seem to vary with culture. It argues that this area could be fruitful for targeted research.

Introduction

Recently, a bunch of cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad appeared in a Danish provincial newspaper, *Jyllands Posten* (30 September 2005). The idea was to discuss self-censorship about depicting Islam among Danish cartoonists. The pictures seemed innocuous to the Danes. In perhaps the most explicit one, an apologetic imam, perhaps Muhammad, drawn in a simple childlike style, is standing on a cloud in what must be heaven. A file of still smoking suicide bombers is arriving. He meets them with the exclamation "Stop we ran out of virgins". A Danish Imam took offence, and subsequently the cartoons were met with burning indignation in parts of the Arab world. Other, more offensive cartoons were added and falsely attributed to *Jyllands Posten*. Danish flags were burnt in demonstrations in the Arab world. It took many diplomatic moves to calm the uproar. Why did a bit of humour cause so much trouble?

This article will explore how the human sense of humour is partly universal, because it is rooted in human nature, and partly dependent upon cultural factors. Before returning to the case of the Danish cartoons we shall need some introductory work.

Joking is a social act (Kuipers, 2006). Kuipers asserts that joking is mainly a male genre, and it is competitive: a joker could lose face if nobody laughs, and he could gain status and improve friendships with a really good joke. Some joke types are almost ubiquitous. Among them are the jokes that mainstream members of a culture make about the supposed faults of peripheral groups. For instance, this Dutch joke:

Q: "What is the fastest way to sink a Belgian ship?"

A: "Launch it".

In this joke the Dutch satisfy a desire for dominance over their Southern neighbours by putting them down as stupid. The 'Belgian' in the opening joke refers to the Flemish, a peripheral group from the perspective of the Dutch. Joking also addresses our capacity for logical abstraction. The joke plays with frames: normally, when one speaks of sinking a ship, one assumes that it was afloat to begin

with. The joke's question part invites one to think about fast ways of sinking a floating ship. The punch line makes us realize that the implicit assumption that the ship was floating does not hold. But people do not joke as much, nor do they joke in the same way and about the same topics, around the world. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore why this is so. Of course, historical contingencies are involved; for example, the Dutch have been seafaring rivals to the Flemish. Non-seafaring countries might make stupidity jokes but these would not feature ships. But why is it, for instance, that the Jews, Scots and Newfoundlanders make numerous jokes about themselves, whereas the Japanese hardly ever do so? It will be proposed that culture, in the sense of the hidden rules of the social game of a people, plays a major role. Because no systematic data collection effort underlies this text, the statements made here should be taken as an invitation for study rather than as a set of conclusions. I have relied heavily on Christie Davies' 2002 book *The Mirth of Nations*. Whenever in this text I mention Davies, this book is referred to. Where no source is given, I have used my own stock of jokes, of which I usually do not remember the source.

Humour, taboos and basic drives

We people are social beings at a very deep level (see e.g. Maslow, 1970). Food, drink and shelter are the basics. Once our bellies have been filled, we are preoccupied with social desires. These revolve around sex, affiliation and dominance: we are on the lookout for potential sexual partners (even if there is no question of consummation), for friends and for esteem. A fourth basic drive is for a fitting degree of novelty: we also get bored if nothing happens. The behavioural system that regulates the satisfaction of these basic needs is called emotions: if we notice a potential partner, we may fall in love, if another one notices that partner too, we become jealous, if the partner prefers us, we are proud and victorious, if we marry that partner we become happy, for lack of novelty we get the seven-year itch. For mnemonic purposes, the basic social drives are captured in the acronym SAND in this chapter (Sex, Affiliation, Novelty, Dominance). In fact these drives are very generic and each one is multifaceted. For instance, the dominance drive includes phenomena such as autonomy, esteem, power, and winning and it surfaces in jokes about jealousy, riches, poverty, vanity, avarice, gender, and sports, just to name a few fields.

Because these drives are so vital to us, and because there is always a scarcity of sex partners and of dominant roles, the drives are a source of political activity: we all have an incentive to keep our cards hidden. Therefore, motivations of our actions in terms of SAND are taboo to some extent in all societies. We tend to disguise our deeper motives behind 'rational' arguments. Some drives are more taboo in some societies though – we'll come to that later.

Humour and jokes are usually about one or more of these drives. Their secrecy makes these drives all the more thrilling to hint at. Jokes frequently reveal the hidden motives behind actions that are supposedly disinterested. Incidentally, the distinction between joke world and real world cannot be taken for granted. The same joke could be quite harmless or quite vicious – for instance, if there were real racial hatred between the Dutch joke teller and the Flemish, the opening joke could become charged with real-life meaning.

Quite apart from their content, the telling of jokes itself is an important social act that gratifies basic needs. The ritual of joke telling strengthens group bonds. It provides the listeners with some novelty, and if they laugh, the joke teller's status in the group is raised. This happens regardless of the joke's content. There is a story about a famous person – let's say, Ronald Reagan – visiting Japan and telling a joke during his speech, upon translation of which the entire Japanese audience started to laugh. After the lecture, Reagan approached the interpreter, praising her for translating the joke so well and asking her how she'd done it. "Sir", she replied hesitatingly, "I said that President Reagan told a funny joke". While the story aims to belittle Reagan's exploits as a joke teller, it serves as a reminder that *any* response to a joke is situated in the relationship between the joke teller and the audience. An audience that does not wish to gratify the joke teller will not laugh, or it will laugh derisively.

But of course the jokes' content also invariably relates to our basic drives. For instance the Flemish get back at the Dutch by this joke about stinginess:

Q: "Do you know who invented the copper thread?"

A: "Two Dutchmen pulling at a cent".

This is a good example of an action that at first seems disinterested: the invention of copper thread. In the punch line it turns out that basic drives were actually the motive. In terms of basic drives, this joke is about dominance as far as the two quarrelling Dutchmen in the story are concerned. For the listener it is also about the novelty that one can think of a copper thread as an elongated copper coin. But another point of appeal is the characterization of Dutchmen as people who are prepared to wage battle over insignificant details. In this joke, the two Dutchmen are so avaricious that they engage in a petty dominance fight over one copper coin. They could have killed one another or used the coin for betting, but they did not.

Basic drives and culture

Each human society has found a different pattern of response to the problems of social life. In some societies, groups are permanent and close-knit while in others, group membership is volatile and voluntary. In some, leadership style is usually autocratic and in others, participative. Research (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) has shown and repeatedly confirmed that basic tendencies to deal with a few central issues of social life are stable across the generations in societies. They are, because they are instilled into a society's members from birth. As a baby and as a toddler, a child is primed as a social being. This even holds for humour. Children might say something like "I know a joke. There were two bananas!" and then look around expectantly. Sure enough, it would be rewarded with a laugh from the audience. A child understands the social dynamics of joke telling before it understands the intellectual side. And of course, a child learns much, much more about the unwritten rules of society – such as whom can you make jokes with, and whom can you make jokes about. Once a child sets foot into the wider society as a teenager, its basic cultural orientation is firmly in place.

This research stream has led to dimension models of culture. The most amply researched among these is the five-dimension model by Hofstede. The five dimensions are about five issues that relate to our basic drives. They will be introduced briefly in order to use them further on in the text. Note that these are not personality traits, but societal patterns! Also note that the picture drawn here is necessarily simplified. It will present the two caricatured extremes of each dimension. In reality, almost all cultures have intermediate positions on almost all dimensions. The five dimensions are (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005):

- **Collectivism versus individualism.** This dimension is about affiliation. To a collectivist mindset, fixed membership of a single group in which all members are interdependent is the natural state of being human. No member of the natural group can be cast aside. This means that maintaining a semblance of harmony is crucial. To an individualist mindset, on the other hand, individual self-sufficiency is the natural state of being. Everybody should be judged in the same way, whether or not the person be a group member. Honest people speak their minds, even if that means open disagreement.
- **Hierarchy.** This dimension is about dominance as an ascribed quality. It has to do with authority as seen from below. Are parents, teachers, priests and bosses held in awe, and is autocratic leadership expected? Then we have a society of large power distance. Or is leadership a role that could change from one person to another with ease, and are all people equal? In that case, the society is one of small power distance.
- **Aggression and gender.** This dimension is about dominance from above, about muscle power, and about the emotional roles of the two sexes. In what is called a masculine society, men in particular

are supposed to be fighters. Women are supposed to be cheerleaders to the men's fight – but they have to be tough too. Men are real men and women are real women. These are fighting societies, with strong-handed police and military and with heavy punishment for offenders. In what is called feminine societies, both men and women are supposed to be peace-loving and consensus seeking and their social behaviours are not strongly different. Both men and women are people, and gender is not supposed to be a big deal. Criminals should be helped, not punished.

- Otherness and Truth. This dimension is about how to cope with the unknowable. The basic drive involved is novelty. Some societies are termed uncertainty avoiding. They tend to have strict rules and rituals about things that are strange or different, such as religious rules and food taboos, or strange sexual practices. In these societies, the distinction between clean and dirty is important. In fact any distinction should be a sharp one. They are concerned about theory, about arguing for its own sake. They like to show their emotions, particularly anxiety, verbally and non-verbally. Other societies are termed uncertainty tolerant. They are relaxed and curious about strange things and not worried about establishing strict classification schemes for everything. They are concerned about practical issues, not theoretical ones.
- Short- versus long-term gratification of needs. This is about all the basic drives. Which drive should get precedence, one that presses now or one that might become pressing in ten years? Some societies live for today, others live for the future. In the former case, life style is more happy-go-lucky and in the latter one, stinginess and calculation are more prominent.

So far, the dimensions of culture have been isolated from one another in an artificial way. In reality, cultures have a recognizable feel to them, a Gestalt that can be described, although no more than roughly, by its combination of dimension scores. With the four basic drives summarized in the acronym SAND, and the five dimensions of culture summarized in the acronym CHAOS, a basic, crude pattern of human social life has been drawn. My assertion is that *humour will be partly universal, where it reflects human drives; but in each society it will tend to concentrate on the issues that are most salient in that society's culture*. Those issues are determined to quite a degree by the combined cultural pattern of the society. This implies that some issues will be more salient as sources of jokes in some societies, and also that the mechanism of joking itself is used differently in different societies. In the remainder of the paper we shall take a *tour d'horizon* of jokes from countries that vary on the five dimensions, to try and find out whether this assertion holds water.

Individualism versus collectivism

An alternative name for the cultural dimension of individualism versus collectivism is low-context versus high-context. This distinction was coined by Edward Hall (1976). Hall describes high-context cultures as having a habitual mode of communicating implicitly, non-verbally and indirectly. By contrast, people in low-context cultures tend to communicate explicitly, verbally and directly. Hofstede found out that this dimension matched his dimension of individualism in that individualistic cultures employ low-context communication and collectivistic cultures employ high-context communication (Hofstede & Hofstede 89:2005). That is, the more individualistic the culture, the more verbal it is likely to be.

A joke in the form of a short story that can be told separately from the rest of a piece of conversation is an instance of low-context communication *par excellence*. It is very brief, blunt and detached from the rest of the communication. One would therefore expect that jokes as self-contained units should be more prevalent among individualistic societies. Collectivistic societies would tend to adopt more implicit and contextual forms of humour. In support of this expectation, among the peoples that have been most prolific in producing jokes according to Davies (2002) we find relatively individualistic cultures only. The Anglo cultures in which jokes flourish are the world's most individualistic culture cluster. Israeli Jewish culture is moderately individualistic. Individualism has been shown to increase with wealth (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) so one would expect US Jewish culture to be no less

individualistic than Israeli Jewish culture. We can conclude that Davies' work supports the hypothesis. The Chinese, a very collectivistic people, particularly enjoy playing with potential double meanings of words in the course of conversations (Jean Wan, personal communication). Davies (p. 71) makes a similar assertion about the Japanese, who are also collectivistic: "Japanese humor is context dependent and in conversation consists of *share* (witticisms and play on words) that do not subsequently get detached from their original context and turned into jokes". Considering this, it is no wonder that the collectivistic Japanese are not renowned for joke telling.

Power distance

By definition, a joke is a fictitious story that carries no relationship with the real world. But jokes tend to play with taboo subjects and in that sense they often paraphrase the real world or exaggerate certain elements of it. Autocratic leaders often fear the force of humour. History shows many examples of autocratic governments trying to ban humour about taboo subjects. Davies argues that this is a way to stimulate the occurrence of precisely the kinds of jokes that are forbidden, since playing with the forbidden and getting time off from prohibitions are functions of jokes.

Leaders and subordinates exist in all societies. Power distance is the degree to which people with a subordinate position in life accept that position as a natural state of affairs. In a society of large power distance, ordinary people do not consider themselves as potential leaders; in fact, they see society as a stratified whole. Could this mean that they are not likely to make jokes about their leaders, simply because they are not part of the same world? *Mutatis mutandis*, are people from hierarchical societies less likely to joke about the divine?

The evidence about jokes collected by Davies does not contradict these suggestions. Anglo peoples and Jews have egalitarian, i.e. small power distance cultures. But in the Arab countries, jokes are also made; consider the following ones collected by Dutch Middle-East correspondent Joris Luyendijk. In Syria he met with a lot of hospitality, and many people told him jokes. For instance (Luyendijk 38:2006, translation gjh):

A Russian, an American and a Syrian secret service agent are having a competition in rabbit-catching. The Russian goes first. After eighteen minutes he returns with a rabbit. The American goes second, and it takes him sixteen minutes to catch a rabbit. Then it is the Syrian's turn. After one hour he is still gone, and the others go look for him. They finally find him under a tree where he is torturing a hare: 'Admit you are a rabbit!'

This joke seems to express a healthy level of scepticism about the powers that be on the part of the common Syrians. Nor were leaders excluded from this kind of joking. In Egypt, Luyendijk had heard numerous jokes at Cairo University. For instance (Luyendijk 39:2006, translation gjh):

One night Osama Al-Baz, advisor to president Mubarak, is strolling across the most famous bridge across the Nile. This bridge is flanked by two colossal bronze lions. Al-Baz jumps up when suddenly, one of these lions tells him "Bring me a lion and I'll tell you the secret of Egypt". Al-Baz runs to president Mubarak: Mr President, quick! I just experienced a miracle, a talking bronze lion!" Al-Baz returns to the bridge with Mubarak. "No, you idiot", yells the lion, "I told you to bring a lion, not a donkey!"

So, after all, jokes about the dictator are being told in these countries, if you know where to listen. Even God does not escape joking, as in this middle-eastern joke of which Luyendijk does not give the origin, but it is probably Syria (Luyebdijk 45:2006, translation gjh):

The dictator's time has come. God sends the Angel of Death to fetch him. But as soon as he sets foot in the dictator's palace, the Angel is arrested and tortured. Exhausted, the Angel returns to heaven. "Where is the dictator?" God asks, displeased. The Angel tells him what happened, upon which God asks, his face ashen and his voice trembling, "You did not give away my name to him, did you?"

These jokes are clear instances of what Davies calls 'time off from prohibition'. The main difference with non-dictatorial countries is that you have to be more careful where and to whom you tell them.

Masculinity versus femininity

This dimension has been called by Geert Hofstede 'the taboo dimension of national culture' (Hofstede et al. 1998). This is because it relates to aggression and to gender roles. That should make it an influential one for joking behaviour. The author of this article happens to be Dutch, and the Netherlands have a national culture that is quite similar to Anglo cultures but for one dimension. While Anglo cultures are fairly masculine, Dutch culture is very feminine. So comparing Anglo humour with Dutch humour boils down largely to crossing the masculine - feminine culture divide.

Three kinds of influences will be discussed in this section: The occurrence, the style and the content of jokes. First, where does joking occur? All the peoples mentioned by Davies as great joke tellers have more or less masculine cultures. Why is this? Well, it could be an artefact of language, since Davies only covers jokes in English. But Kuipers (2006) directly compared the US and the Netherlands and she found that in the Netherlands, joke telling is related to class. Upper-class people in the Netherlands consider joke telling to be bad taste, unless the humour is ambivalent and understated. Blatant, 'hard' humour is only popular among the lower classes and the youth, particularly among boys. In the US, all ages and genders were positive about humour.

Feminine values in societies have been shown to be positively correlated with age, female gender and education. All three of these correlations are also found in the occurrence of joking behaviour. It definitely looks as though joke-telling is used as a status enhancer upon which the more feminine segments of the feminine Dutch society, who have been taught that modesty is a great virtue, frown. Cultural femininity is also related to tolerance of jokes on the part of the receiver. In more masculine cultures, there tends to be more violence. Along with this, in a chicken-and-egg relationship, there is less tolerance for jokes about violence or sex. This is exemplified in a famous practical joke played by a Dutchman, former Minister and well-known joker Mr. Udink, on an airline hostess of a US airline in 1977. The airplane had on board Rosalynn Carter, the First Lady. When a stewardess started to help Mr Udink to stow away a large package he was carrying, he joked "be careful miss, there's a bomb inside". The stewardess took him for his word. The dazed Mr Udink was handcuffed and arrested. His remark, which seemed perfectly recognizable as a joke to him, did not appear so to the air hostess, who was probably under strict instructions as to how to deal with any threats to security¹.

¹ An anonymous reviewer of a previous version suggested that "...the same protocol would be seen in Britain and everywhere else". The reviewer is probably right about Britain, which is culturally similar to the USA. But as a Dutchman I can testify that a Dutch stewardess would probably recognize Mr Udink's joke for what it was, and would at most reproach him gently, saying that this was not something to make jokes about. In fact I got the

Kuipers (2006) did empirical research about the reception of jokes in the USA and in the Netherlands. One of the jokes she submitted to her audience went as follows (*NRC-Handelsblad* 8/9 July 2006, translation gjh):

A primary school mistress is presenting a class of children with riddles. First one: "it lives on the farm, it is spotted, and it gives milk". Johnny puts up his finger and says: "A cow!" The teacher replies "yes Johnny, that is correct, but I meant a goat". Second riddle: "it lives on the farm, it has feathers, and it lays eggs". Johnny puts up his finger once more and exclaims: "a chicken!" The teacher replies "yes Johnny, that is correct, but I meant a goose". Johnny is pissed and asks to be permitted to also present a riddle. "It is hard and dry when you put it into your mouth and when it comes out it is soft and wet". The teacher blushes deeply, and Johnny says "That is correct miss, but I meant a piece of bubble gum".

The Dutch respondents liked this joke, while the US respondents frowned upon it. Probably, the Americans disliked the assumption that the child was sexually aware, which they may have interpreted as moral depravation. They may also have disliked the style (understatement), our second topic.

As to style, one would expect that masculine societies use overstatement a lot while feminine cultures use understatement. Let us consider some evidence.

Davies provides examples of overstatement in jokes. He lists numerous male-only Australian jokes that overstates chundering ('watch under'-ing, or throwing up). He gives a sound historical explanation in the all-male convict population that founded modern Australian society. In the feminine society of the Netherlands, blunt joking mainly occurs among lower-class males. The same holds for innocuous joking that exaggerates male identity. When at a reception I walked a few steps and a middle-aged Australian academic colleague jokingly warned me "Hey, watch out! You are trying to get between a man and his beer" I was very much amazed; In my mindset, such a joke was out of context.

Another area in which the style of humour might vary with cultural masculinity is sex. How much humour would there be without sex? Many jokes are about sex quite explicitly. Sex can be overstated, as in the following American Jewish joke (Davies 2002, p. 80):

When Harry died, his wife had him cremated, brought the ashes home in an urn and tipped them onto the table. "Well, Harry", she said, "You always wanted me to give you a blow job..."

The reverse can also occur, as in this Dutch joke:

Q: "How can you see if a Dutchman has a little one?"

A: "From the baby seat on his bicycle".

anecdote from the 1978 *Bescheurkalender*, a publication by renowned Dutch humorists Koot and Bie who themselves got it from a national newspaper. They obviously included it because they thought it was a curious and funny incident.

The first joke is not about sex while seeming to be so. This ‘sexual overstatement’ is a frequently used device in jokes, and it fits a masculine culture such as Jewish culture. In the latter joke, just like in the classroom riddles joke, ‘sexual understatement’ or seeming innocence of the joker is being used. There is no explicit reference to sex. Only a dirty mind can understand the joke because of the hidden allusions. It might well be that this usage, in which the joker does not assume a position of superiority, occurs more frequently in cultures with cultural femininity, such as the Netherlands or Scandinavia.

Thirdly, let us consider joke content. One would expect masculine societies to joke at the expense of women or of men who are subordinate to women, and feminine societies to do so more at the expense of men in general, or of power holders in general. Within societies we would expect the same difference between male and female humour.

For instance, there is a Dutch joke saying “*Bij de Zweden ligt hij beneden*”, (“When the Swedes have a go, he lies below”, gjh). This might or might not be so, but it is certainly a fact that Sweden has the most feminine culture of all those in the Hofstede database, and probably of the world.

Cultural dimensions are comparative. Although it is not as feminine as Scandinavia, Canada has a more feminine culture than the US – in fact this is the main cultural difference between the two. Therefore it comes as no surprise that Canadian men are pictured in jokes as less macho than Americans. Here is an example²:

A Canadian is walking down the street with a case of beer under his arm.
His friend Doug stops him and asks, 'Hey Bob! Whacha get the case of beer for?'
'I got it for my wife, eh.' answers Bob.
'Oh!' exclaims Doug, 'Good trade.'

The joke has a culturally masculine flavour, placing a wife at a par with consumption goods. But the reader is free to sympathize with either Bob or Doug. Incidentally, wife trading in an Anglo country is not new: as late as 1884, in England wives were still publicly sold (Paxman, 1998). The joke does not specify Doug’s nationality, so it leaves room for improvement. The joke teller could take a bit of distance from Doug by positing him as some kind of foreigner. In fact non-Anglo readers of this joke might well infer that Doug was a Yankee. There are many examples of jokes told in one country about people from another one. Italian lovers are famous in jokes, and Italy’s culture is culturally masculine.

Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance may well be the cultural dimension that most affects the content of jokes. In uncertainty avoiding countries cleanliness and purity are important, while dirt or impurity release anxieties. Inclusion and exclusion are distinct categories with clear boundaries. One would expect jokes to be created about them, unless the subject were too much of a taboo. In uncertainty tolerant cultures, staying calm and relaxed whatever happens is the norm.

² This joke was contributed by a Canadian woman to <http://fukkad/jokes/ethnic>

The collection of jokes in Davies does not contradict this suggestion. Jewish culture is very high on uncertainty avoidance. Of course one might argue that this is due to historical persecution, and so it might be; but a persecuted people with less of a sense of separate identity might well have dispersed into other peoples. The strong uncertainty avoidance shows in Jewish love of argument, and with the large number of jokes about Jewish identity as unchangeable and distinct from goyim, or from Christians. The jokes are a way of stressing unique, distinct Jewish identity, even if they are only jokes. For instance (Davies, p. 60)

In the 1920 two men were walking along 5th Avenue. The first one was Otto Kahn, a patron of the Metropolitan Opera. The second was Marshall B. Wilder, a hunchbacked scriptwriter. As they walked past a synagogue Kahn turns to Wilder and says, "You know, I used to be a Jew", and Wilder says, "Yeah and I used to be a hunchback".

A Jew converts to Catholicism and eventually becomes a priest. He is invited to speak in a church. After the service the local bishop congratulates him: Everything was fine he says. "Only next time, maybe you shouldn't begin by saying 'Fellow goyim'"

Irish culture, on the other hand, is uncertainty tolerant. The Irish are fighters, as they show in Northern Ireland. But in their jokes they allow shifts in attitudes as in the following one by Mick Harkin:

Two young Muslim friends, Rahim and Ahmad, decide to leave Pakistan and to emigrate to Ireland. Before they leave they agree to meet after one year to determine who has become the most Irish.

One year passes and, true to their word, the two lads meet in Dublin.

Rahim says: I have become very Irish. I have a Roy Keane Celtic football shirt, I support the Irish soccer and rugby teams, I fish, I play hurling for Cork, I drink Guinness and have an Irish red setter!

He beams triumphantly at his friend: "How Irish have you become?"

Ahmad sneers at him and snarls: "F*ck off you Paki ba*tard!"

The joke probably says more about the Irish than about the Pakistani. But it has many potential layers. Ahmad might be serious, or more likely he might just be joking by quoting remarks that he is getting from native Irish to show that he knows that he and Rahim will always really be Pakistani, however hard Rahim tries to be Irish.

Long-term versus short-term orientation

Short-term orientation is about living for the day. Black Africa is the world's region with the most short-term oriented cultures. This trait seems to have been carried over to the USA, at least if jokes about Blacks have any foundation in reality. For instance (Davies p. 188)

Q: "What's the definition of confusion?"

A: "Father's Day in Harlem".

On the other hand of the spectrum, one finds the Chinese. They have a reputation for industriousness, not for unrestrained libidos. The Chinese see everything in a continuum of time rather than making categorical, time-invariant judgements. The following joke³ is an example.

A policeman making his round passes by a house from which a terrible shouting is heard. He stops to investigate and bangs the door. A woman opens it. "Who is the head of this household?" barks the policeman. "Wait a moment, sir, and I'll tell you", comes the answer. "We are just settling it".

The joke's point is that the man is not the head of the household. That point can be appreciated by anybody. My reason for including the joke is the undecided status of leadership and the implication that it can always change in the future. This aligns with Chinese culture, in which truths are never absolute.

Jokes as ethnography

Many jokes are told about national stereotypes, and they enjoy great popularity. For instance, the search string {heaven hell Italians French Swiss} fetches 400.000 hits on Google, almost all of which are about this joke:

"Heaven is where the Police are British, the Chefs are French, the Mechanics are German, the Lovers Italian and it's all organized by the Swiss.
Hell is where the Chefs are British, the mechanics are French, the lovers are Swiss, the Police are German and it's all organized by the Italians".

Although this is just a joke, I believe that its popularity testifies that many people recognize an element of the Gestalt of these cultures in it. Of course, the joke oversimplifies the cultural stereotypes to such an extent that one can no longer seriously attach meaning to them. In any country, one can find good and bad Chefs, for instance. But presumably, the stereotypes are true in another sense: many people believe them to be true, and so they act as lenses of perception, as self-fulfilling prejudices.

Religion is another area where this kind of stereotyping joke occurs. Davies (p. 57) mentions a joke of the well-known triad format:

A minister, a priest and a rabbi who are playing golf get held up by a very slow group playing ahead of them. On enquiry they discover that the tardy golfers up ahead are all blind.
"What a wonderful display of courage in the face of adversity", says the minister. "I shall preach about them in my next sermon".

³ told to me by a Chinese friend, Jean Wan.

“It is truly a miracle that they can play golf”, says the priest. “God must have inspired them. I’ll speak about this to the faithful”.

“Huh”, says the rabbi, “Why can’t the schmucks play at night?”

Here, the protestant ethic with its stress on self-sufficiency clearly contrasts with the hierarchical attitude of the Catholic Church. This is no coincidence, culturally speaking. Catholicism has become widespread in countries with large power distance, while the Reformation has hit more egalitarian countries. So this stereotype bears some similitude with reality. The rabbi gives the canny punch line.

Of course, sexual mores are also prominent in ethnic jokes. The Swedes with their non-hierarchical, feminine, uncertainty tolerant culture give rise to jokes about women being in charge, relaxed and not particularly concerned about men’s sexual desires. Here is a joke of US origin:⁴

A young guy was lying on his back on a massage table, wearing only a towel over his groin.

A young, very attractive Swedish girl was massaging his shoulders, then his chest, and gradually worked her way down his torso.

The guy was getting excited as the masseuse approached the towel. The towel began to lift and the Swedish girl arched her eyebrows. "You wanna wank?" she asked.

"You bet!" came the excited reply.

"O.K.", she said. "I come back in ten minutes”.

The overall picture

Together the cultural dimensions shape an overall picture of a society’s unwritten rules. Because so many other factors are at play, and because a joke is only one joke, not a corpus of data, this article is not the place to give any sort of decisive statement about the relationship between culture and joking practices of a society. But some expectations can be put forward. For instance, let us revisit the Danish cartoon incident. A culture of collectivism, large power distance, masculinity, and strong uncertainty avoidance would be one in which joking can be risky because – on the whole – people are quick to take offence at anything out of the norm, group pressures are strong, and leadership is autocratic so the whims of the current regime are important considerations. In everyday words this translates as loyalty to worldly and divine leaders and a strong sense of group honour. Such a culture profile is found in some of the more authoritarian Muslim countries, e.g. Saudi-Arabia, and other Arab countries. The Arab world is also rather short term oriented. This trait coincides with easy inflammation about matters of principle. In terms of the SAND acronym, it takes little to offend the dominance drive. In times when the collective sense of honour of a people with this cultural orientation is trampled upon, such as the present time with its Western hegemony and its Western invasions of Arab countries, people with the cultural orientation described here, and who identify with the countries that are being invaded, are likely to react in violent ways.

⁴ The joke is from <http://fukkad/jokes/ethnic>

The Scandinavians have just about the opposite orientation on all dimensions as do the Arabs, except that they are not so long-term oriented. They are individualistic, egalitarian, feminine and uncertainty tolerant. In the Scandinavian mindset, doing your own thing, taking it easy, living and letting live, and avoiding fighting are important. Moreover, economically speaking Denmark is doing fine, and there are no military threats either. No wonder, then, that a bunch of cartoons about the Prophet that seemed innocuous to the Danes was met with burning indignation in parts of the Arab world.

So we see that in this case, cultural differences on four of the dimensions, as well as differences in circumstances between the societies involved, formed an explosive mix. As a result, the boundary between the world of jokes and the real world that Christie Davies argues should be respected was not recognized by the offended. A joke was interpreted as an insult against their Divine Leader and as such, an insult to the honour of their group.

Besides being useful to explain real-world incidents, culture can also be used in research. The framework introduced here can serve as an auxiliary variable in the study of humour. For instance, let us do a miniature meta-analysis of a study by Chiaro (2006). She gives an overview of humour in comic films in which she opposes male and female texts. She finds large differences, with males typically using verbal wit and females using their bodies to be laughed at. There are some exceptions though, in which females put up 'Verbally Expressed Humour' of rare virtuosity. A cultural perspective on Chiaro's article reveals that all the films are of Anglo origin. That means that the script writers were probably of an individualistic, masculine, uncertainty tolerant mindset. Such a mindset would spark exactly the kind of gender-biased practical joke-oriented or stand-up comedian-like use of humour that Chiaro found. A study of humour in films from other parts of the world could reveal what part of the pattern found by Chiaro is universal and which elements are local to Anglo culture. A current enemy to humour is the succession of waves of political correctness (PC) sweeping individualist, masculine Anglo countries. In the absence of dictators, PC provides new taboos. Where jokes declare that words and stories are a domain of freedom to talk and to laugh, PC battles assert the opposite. For a discussion of their dynamics, see Hofstede (2006).

Conclusion

Almost all jokes are related to basic human drives that are important in all cultures across the world. For instance, innumerable jokes exist that strengthen feelings of dominance of the joke teller's group over some other group. Coincidental historical circumstances also play a very large role in the history of jokes; jokes build on social reality.

This essay has argued that alongside these factors, jokes are also charged with cultural significance. They can be connected to culture in the following ways:

- Culture of joke creators affects joke style and content. Jokes are created about themes that are salient in the culture of their creators.
- Culture of joke tellers and hearers affects joking as a social activity. In collectivist cultures, jokes tend to be contextual and therefore hard to isolate from the conversation in which they occurred. In hierarchical cultures, joking about worldly or spiritual leaders is dangerous. In masculine cultures, joking about morality is not done. And the Danish cartoon incident describes how all dimensions of culture play a role in real life production and reception of humour.
- Jokes carry culture. They are a form of folk tales. Jokes about national stereotypes serve to reinforce those stereotypes.

An issue that was not covered is language: the close link between cultures and languages that evolved with these cultures implies that humour travels poorly across languages.

This article is limited in its claims, resting as it does on educated guesswork. A systematic study will no doubt discover much more. Joking across cultures deserves to be taken seriously.

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