

Book review

Chukwuma, Ignatius (ed). (2022). *Sexual Humour in Africa*. London: Routledge.

The essays in this book indubitably are invitations to read with knife-like interest in the complexities and sensibilities of issues bordering on humour, sex and sexuality. The subject of humour in Africa, beyond a shadow of doubt, occupies a centric position in the essays edited by a major voice in Humour Studies in Africa, Prof. Ignatius Chukwuma. Humour, however, as treated by most contributors in the essays published in this laudable book, cannot be judged as one that simply speaks to the inner joy but rather as a sort of what Dune (2007) describes as “Calvinist humour”. Dune sees this type of humour as deriving laughter in the imperfection of others while ignoring our fallibility or likelihood of being in the same boat with the object of our laughter. It is this type of humour and its implications on sex and sexuality that most of the contributors explore in this collection of essays. The book is divided into six parts of fourteen chapters with each focusing on a common thematic concern.

Part 1 “Sex Jokes” begins with Sebastine Gadomski’s essay “Egyptian sex jokes: perspectives, classification, and analysis”. The erotic contexts of sex related jokes in Egypt and the stimulation of laughter are major concerns of this essay. Certainly, most of the jokes selected for the study’s analysis are referential. In other words, they allude to common erotic jokes in Egypt. Few verbal jokes as raw material and sites for humour also characterise this essay.

In Chapter 2 “Sex humour: Purveyor of sex mores and power matrices” by Patrick Chesi Lumasia, the flavour of the essay lies on how the author delves into Kenyan common sex jokes and proverbs to explicate sexual acts among the Maragoli peoples’ sex mores and the gender biases against women. The author further explores the dysphemism of sex talk associated with Mary Kamali, a self-proclaimed pastor, comedian, counsellor, and motivational speaker, who breached taboos to expose women oppression especially in the bedroom. To Lumasia, “sex is amongst humanity’s most repressed urges, which must on occasion find vent on special events” (p. 28). The writer masterfully uses agricultural analogical frames to portray sexual mores and functions among the Maragoli.

In the third chapter, Cheela Chilala and Humphrey M. Kapau, against the currency of socio-cultural and political strife even among neighbouring communities in Africa, investigate sex-jokes as a mediation strategy between the Tonga and Lonzi tribes of Zambia. Using the interpretative scope of Critical Discourse Analysis, they bring to memory the widely practised tribal cousinship *chimbuya*, a cultural practice that is characterised by mutual respect and humour. Critical to the essay is the portrayal of women and men in *chimbuya* sex talk. This is the case with the situational and cultural licence to sex jokes during *Shimunenga Ceremony*, in which vulgarity to sex related jokes are granted to women.

The second part comes under the theme “African language, folk music, and rhetorical strategies”. Chapter 4, “Pudendic cult and public discourse: Pornogrammar as a rhetorical strategy in Ghana’s public spaces”, by Joseph Brookman Amissah-Arthur examines public discourse in Ghana and pornogrammar as exemplified in traditional Akan society. Against the background of a thriving pudendic cult culture in Akan society, the author invites readers to the

mass production of sex humour in Akan public life. The author deserves credit on how he examines the x-type proverbs, Akan erotic poems as well as the linguistic subterfuge often deployed to conceal verbal taboos involving the subject of sexuality in the public space, without losing its humorous effects.

Fred W. Simiyu and Felix Orina in Chapter 5 takes us to the East African popular culture. Here, the authors, using the theoretical approach of Critical Humour Studies, x-ray how coital images in Bukusu *Embalu* and East African popular songs stimulate the creation of sexual humor. One of the highlights of this essay is how the authors illuminate the use of vivid imagery, hyperbole, repetition, irony, and other figurative languages in the songs “Maweyo omwana”, “Euno” by the soloists (musicians) during *Embalu* rite. These figurative expressions are deployed to create comical effects. To the authors, “a level of self-deprecation, an otherwise bizarre and solemn situation is turned into one that people can laugh about in a relaxed manner” especially during initiation into adulthood accompanied by “Maweyo Omwana” (p. 102).

In Part 3, the subject of “Sex joke and the written word” comes under critical attention by the contributors. Reading Barasa Remmy Shiundu’s “Validating the subversive: A reading of sex images in Okot P’ Bitek’s *Song of Malaya*”, the audacity of a female persona especially on sex-talk in Bitek’s text is aptly captured. In this essay, Shiunda carefully examines the controversial subject of sex and sexuality particularly when female characters or personae are given the premium of handling sex talk unapologetically. Hence, Shiundu explores Malaya’s furtive sex business, which is characterised by seductiveness, by foregrounding the perspicacity of Malaya who deploys “the power of a woman and rallies other women in subverting the binary oppositions of inferior versus superior, weak versus strong, dependent versus independent, and submissive versus assertive” (p. 123). Malaya thus unwittingly, unbars the hypocrisy of humanity, especially of patriarchal dominance. The meat in Shiunda’s essay lies on how she elicits dark humour even when immorality is validated.

In Chapter 7, “Through the lens of gender: Sex jokes in selected contemporary East African popular fiction”, written by Vincent O. Oduor, one sees from the introduction the author’s mission of interrogating sex jokes as texts of aesthetic value and referring to gender relations. With Mwangi Gicheru’s *Across the Bridge* and Okot p’ Bitek’s *Song of Lawino*, the two selected East African popular fictions upon which the study is based, Oduor explains how sexual humour and sex jokes reflect the complexity of a society where “sexual intercourse is taken for granted” (p. 142).

The central themes of gender and ideology are given special attention in Part 4. Chapter 8 and the first essay in this section “‘I beg to differ’: Queer notes on Kenyan editorial cartoons” by Eddie Ombagi is an intellectual discourse on gay-related humour. Ombagi begins the study with the controversy surrounding two Kenyan men alleged to be gay as captured in Kenyan print media. The attention of the writer is, however, on the humour stimulated by the editorial cartoon of the print media which employs both visual and verbal commentaries to render mordacious social judgement carefully wrapped and delivered through laughter-provoking illustrations. In this analytical essay, the author delves into editorial cartoons to provide insight on the place of humour in Kenyan queer discourse and the underlining sexual politics. The essay’s title “I beg to differ...”, interestingly, is taken from an editorial cartoon drawn by Patrick Gathara, a popular Kenyan cartoonist whose voice resonates the voice of gay rights in Kenya and the heavy criticism against queer individuals by African political leaders. The study is driven further by the author’s exposé on the hypocritical dimensions and counter-narratives on queer existence and practitioners in Africa and the West as projected in editorial cartoons.

Benedicta A. Lomotey and Grace Diabah’s “A socio-pragmatic inquiry of the place of humour in gender performance and practices” in Chapter 9, reopens humour-filled sex jokes with special interest in paralinguistic strategies deployed in representing supposedly tabooed

concepts associated with sexual organs, their socio-cultural underpinnings and, of course, the ideological frame “that form the substrata of sex jokes” (p. 169). The authors explore the functions of jokes in reproducing, negotiating, and contesting the imbalance in power relation and gender ideologies. The central and major contribution of this study dwells on the authors’ ability to spot humour in the analysed sex jokes as a convincing strategy in promoting ideological standpoints of gender and as checkmating harmful gender stereotypes in the Ghanaian Akan society. Another advantage of this essay involves the authors’ showing of how heedlessly rendered sex jokes, though characterised by humour, can be counterproductive as they harbour and are capable of re-inventing “the hegemonic cultural imagery of society” of what the writers termed “the ambivalence of humour” (p. 184). If Keough (1990) argues that American humour harbours sexism, we cannot exclude Africa from the same sentiment of sexist-filled humour as seen in Chapter 9.

In Chapter 10, the book’s editor, Ignatius Chukwuma takes readers to the joke performances of a leading female comedienne in Nigeria, Helen Paul. In his essay “Reinforcing gendered scripts: sexuality and double performance in Helen Paul’s joke performance”, Chukwuma navigates gendered performative dispositions in Nigeria’s vibrant multi-talented comedienne. Through the theoretical insights of gender, Chukwuma explains how Helen Paul’s joke performances represent what he describes as “double-gendering, through the duplication of gendered performative acts” (p. 195). The study reveals how the comedienne deploys “verbal gendered imagery” to evoke humour while explaining “the modern gendered modes of sexual attraction characterising femininity” (p. 197). For example, Chukwuma’s critical insights point to beauty enhancements “packaging” that has become common practice among modern African women. To this end, he accentuates the substitution of African values for western culture that has permeated and seem to resonate well among modern African women (e.g., butt enlargements). The chapter concludes with the author showing the readers how Helen Paul’s joke performances produce humour especially using (wo)men gendered body parts to explain the complexities of spinsterhood and husband or wife searching in Christian religious spaces.

Part 5 of the book comprises of two essays. If the preceding chapter by Chukwuma dwells on one of Nigeria’s leading comediennes, Filani and Oluwatomi’s “‘Ooin, freaky freaky, you are doing well’: A discourse analysis of the representation of women in selected Nigerian skits” takes us to arguably one of Nigeria’s heavy weight skit performers popularly known as Mr. Macaroni. The contribution of this essay to knowledge involves the authors’ probe into the framing of feminine functions and imaging of the woman’s body as “playful objects” in Nigeria’s “comicast utterances” (p. 219). The writers reveal how poor imaging of women’s bodies in comicast tend to validate patriarchal or masculine power even though the comicasts portray women as manipulative with their bodies. Through the framework of Critical Pragmatics, Filani and Oluwatomi unmask the dangerous ideologies harboured in the motif with which the audience in Mr. Macaroni skits derive their humour (p. 221).

The second essay, “The humour of erotica: Representations of women in Ghanaian social media” by Hannah Woode Amissah-Arthur, is anchored on the incongruity theory of humour. Amissah-Arthur’s scholarly enterprise invites us to explore how female bodies in Ghana, as typified in several other African countries, are caricatured as emblems of sexism in the social media. The essay is unavoidably a condemnation of a society which derives laughter in the sarcastic representation of Ghanaian women rather than positive portrayal of their inherent values. As evident in the chapter’s title, most of the sex images selected as data for the study’s analysis from the social media focus on the genitalia of Ghanaian women; they foreground Ghanaian women’s sexuality as the centre of their existence. This apparently undermines women’s inherent values and contribution to the society.

As I flip towards the concluding pages of the book in Part 6, the contributors Martin Okwoli Ogba and Sandra N. Nwagbaso and Adachukwu A. Okafor, all examine humour as a strategic response and resistance to flaky masculinity. Ogba's article in Chapter 13 for instance, is a cursory look at the reader-response (expressive reactions) to provocative sex jokes along gender lines. Interestingly, using radical feminism and superiority concepts, the author argues that the playboy machismo is often wrapped in humour and what Yahiaoui (2022) describes as "playful entertainment". Examining how rape culture is downplayed in Basket Mouth's rape sex jokes, Ogba describes Basket Mouth's sex jokes on rape as weird masculinity that is capable of promoting "rape cases in Nigeria" (p. 275).

In the last chapter of the book with such gripping topic "'Good for the goose, better for the gander': Female sex jokes responses to cultural convention in selected social media chats", Nwagbaso and Okafor give insights on how sex jokes by women, are expressions of resistance against hegemonic socio-cultural beliefs. The authors probe taboos and such other cultural practices that inhibit women or put them at disadvantaged positions. Applying the incongruity theory in their analysis, the authors succinctly delineate the logical impossibility in some of the male originated sex jokes that tend to squelch women's capacity and values. Specifically, the study is a disapproval of male-derived jokes that "humiliate women in an aggressive tone", when such jokes poke fun on female sensuality (p. 288).

That this volume of scholarly essays is a remarkable contribution to Humour Studies in Africa is not in doubt. I must admit, however, that the admirable quality of the essays is marred by the exclusion of discourse on sexual humour from French speaking nations in Africa. I also expected the dimension of punchlines from some Francophone countries in Africa to give the entire volume a fair balance, although attaining perfection in this kind of sterling book, is a near impossibility. That said, generally, readers have a stock of ideas on humour as it relates to sex and sexuality fully packed in this edited volume. Ignatius Chukwuma certainly has inspired a worthwhile interdisciplinary discourse with the freshness of ideas on humour research in Africa. Indeed, it is a must have collection of research papers for all who dream a critical understanding of the politics of humour, and the complexities of sex and sexuality in Africa.

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