

Sexual Humour in Africa: Gender, Jokes, and Societal Change.

Ignatius Chukwumah (editor).

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Sexual Humour in Africa is a compendium of fourteen chapters that examine sexual humour in diverse African contexts. Grouped into six broad thematic areas, the chapters draw from an array of disciplines that include cultural studies, anthropology, and linguistics to explore what the editor Ignatius Chukwumah terms the “ways to let off the forbidden in modes permissible by [the] immediate environment” (xviii). Through in-depth analyses and case studies, the chapters in this book examine various themes such as power and gender dynamics, social change, and identity construction within the realm of sexual humour in Africa. The chapters deal with how sexual humour is presented in social media, popular fiction and music, advertisements, and many other media and cultural productions. *Sexual Humour in Africa* presents a laudable endeavour to shed important light on an often-overlooked aspect of African cultures. The book goes beyond considering sexual humour as merely lewd or prurient for the sake of being prurient, this book successfully captures the vibrant and intricate nature of sexual humour, demonstrating its capacity to subvert established norms and challenge power structures. The inclusion of a range of disciplinary perspectives provides a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

As previously stated, this book is divided into six main sections. The first, “Sex joke: Typology, Modes, and Mores”, reveals that, while sexual humour conveys some gender(ed) stereotypes, it also allows for the revelation of hidden desires and tensions. The chapters in this section also demonstrate how social media have influenced how sex jokes circulate and are consumed. Importantly, the virtual circulation and consumption of sex humour has enabled localised sex mores to interact with global sex mores. The second section, “African language, folk music, and rhetorical strategies”, explores sexual humour through and in traditional African

art forms. These forms provide entertainment and insight, while also navigating complex social relations and verbal etiquette. The third segment is entitled “Sex joke and the written word” and examines sexual humour in literary texts. Sex jokes in popular fiction highlight gender and power dynamics, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing old gender norms. These distorted images of women perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce old gender norms, highlighting the cultural references to gender and power dynamics “(Cis) gender, ideology, and discourse” is the next section and it focuses on how ideology-influenced popular gender ideas connect to sociocultural stereotypes and sex jokes. Humour, as argued in the chapters in this section, upholds the current quo of gender, promoting damaging notions through generations. Treating sexist discourses as neutral only serves to perpetuate their harm. Gendered scripts continue to be reinforced. The penultimate section, “Bodies and representations”, examines how humour that employs the female body as a motif and target, reinforces harmful ideologies. The chapters investigate how humour has the potential to inscribe women as sex symbols in various sociocultural contexts. The ultimate section, “Resistance and responses”, explores the potential link between humourizing rape and the alarming rise of rape cases. The chapters analyse female responses to rape and sexist jokes, and how sex jokes can be a form of resistance against traditional cultural silence.

Given my own research interests in gender and queer studies, I found Eddie Ombagi’s chapter entitled “I beg to differ: Queer notes on Kenyan editorial cartoons” to be a delightful read. The chapter is written in a very accessible language which does not, however, water down the complex issues that are discussed therein. Ombagi focuses on the marriage of two Kenyan men which took place in the UK in 2009, to think through the different registers that speak to the circulation and consumption of jokes on queer people. The jokes and spinoffs on this marriage, Ombagi argues, were “deliberately sensationalised to create as much buzz as possible in order to invoke nationalistic metaphors of degraded and decrepit Western influence” (142). Ombagi demonstrates that jokes on queer people articulated through cartoons, function as counter sites or counterpublics which “humorously problematise the discourse of queer expressions in Kenya” (145). The overarching argument made in this chapter is that humour embedded in cartoons serves as a creative form that connects with queer subject matters. It does so to foreground a model that frames queer stories in a way that destabilises common gender and political

discourses in Kenya. Humorous cartoons achieve this within a cultural framework that acknowledges the difficulties and at times impossibility of queer visibility within a historical frame, as well as within the specific visual medium frame. The close analysis of the selected reading makes for a fascinating read which challenges the understanding of what sexual humour can achieve. I found this chapter to be an invaluable addition to the growing body of queer African scholarship and its focus on humour is undoubtedly fresh and ground-breaking.

The book’s contextual approach is undoubtedly one of its most prominent strengths. The book acknowledges the diversity of African societies and avoids broad generalisations by focusing on specific regional and cultural circumstances. The chapters in the book consider countries as diverse as Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and Zambia. Their various authors provide nuanced insights into the complexity of sexual humour and its ramifications, for instance, for gender relations in many African communities. The contributors are attuned to cultural and historical specificities within which sexual humour functions, circulates and is consumed.

Although the book covers diverse regional contexts and fields of study, I felt that it falls short in adequately engaging with sexual humour in some regions of the continent which are marginalised when Africa is studied. For instance, the book does not include any study from lusophone or francophone African countries. I have argued in my own work that it is important for the broad field of African studies “to look beyond the dismembering of the continent and its different regions and to imagine an Africa that is liberated from its colonial borders” (Ncube 3). It is, of course, inevitable that the question of language could have posed a veritable challenge in allowing for a more robust engagement with different parts of the continent. It is important to note that this sole weakness does not negate the book’s overall contributions but rather offer areas for further exploration and development within the field of sexual humour studies in Africa.

The editor and the contributors should be commended for this innovative contribution to the field. It convincingly challenges the prevailing perception of African humour as solely crude or vulgar, presenting a compelling case for the transformative potential of sexual humour. The book highlights the agency of African communities in using humour as a tool for social change and self-expression. This book makes a significant contribution to diverse fields of African studies such as literary studies, theatre and

performance studies, sociology, cultural studies, gender and queer studies, linguistics, and anthropology.

Works cited

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